

STORIES OF GROWTH AND DECLINE:
EXAMINING THE MEASUREMENT OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH'S EFFICACY

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ABSTRACT

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The church has been keeping records in various forms for centuries. The Episcopal Church in the US continues that tradition and has focused in the last century primarily on membership and average Sunday worship attendance (ASA). Several research organizations collect data from churches which are often reported in popular press and religious organization publications. As church attendance and the role of church in people's lives and in broader society has changed, these statistics have become less useful in describing the efficacy of the church in its mission and in helping clergy determine what is effective in ministry, resulting in an overall narrative of decline of the church.

This study seeks to gather information from seven parish clergy in the same diocese in which I serve as rector of Phila Church. These clergy were asked about their assessments of their parish and ministry. Participants were interviewed about the ways they detect growth and decline in their parishes. Most participants reported that ASA is one indicator among many they use to determine "how the church is doing." Two participants described concrete processes their parishes use to decide where and how to deploy human and financial resources for ministry. Others outlined the cues and anecdotes that help them assess for decline or growth.

The responses and analysis of the responses of participants are presented alongside my assessment of Phila Church, where I had earlier applied several processes to assess readiness and capacity for change. Results from these processes at Phila Church demonstrate the suitability of translating existing tools and processes from the social sciences into church usage. Because these existing social science tools are reliable and valid, their use could encourage clergy and laity with beneficial evaluations of their ministry efforts.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the loving God who has known me since before I was born, and who continues to guide me into who I am to become. It is also dedicated to the women who are called to minister in God's church, the ones who paved the way for me and the ones who will follow; and to all who notice the creative work of God in every discipline and profession, who strive to knit together a common life from uncommon ideas as agents of reconciling and redeeming love.

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of the church is to embody the presence of Jesus Christ on earth and to carry out the gospel mandate of making disciples. It is difficult to know how well the church is fulfilling this mission and what are the costs for fulfilling that mission. The presumed efficacy of the church toward its mission is most often tied to the growth or decline of membership. Narratives about church growth and decline can shape our perceptions and assumptions, can create self-fulfilling prophecies, and can also inspire hopeful messages about the work of God in the world. The challenges to progress are hard to manage without effective definitions and evaluation tools, to know what is and is not working toward reaching a goal.

The purpose of this study is to examine the local perspective of the perceived effectiveness of The Episcopal Church (TEC), which includes how clergy are trained and compensated, as well as whether the life of a community is improved by the church's presence. The goal of this research is to examine the connections between clergy understanding of perceived efficacy of the church and the narrative of decline present in much popular dialogue about the church. Additionally, this study seeks to discover threads of a new narrative that may lead toward consistent and useful evaluation of church efficacy.

Many stories about the church-at-large in the 20th and 21st centuries assume declining membership. Religion News Network wrote "Postcards from the Protestant Decline in America" about Millennials' non-attendance, and "The End of the Presbyterian Church (USA)" was posted on Patheos.com in 2008, pre-dating their more

recent conflicts over human sexuality. This narrative of decline, heard both inside and outside the church, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, or at least a significant source of anxiety. People inside the church fear the effects of decline and may express that fear as desperation toward visitors, potentially scaring new members away. Other people outside the church hear about the decline and consider the information irrelevant, possibly because they do not see the church as more than a building or are not aware of how the church can benefit the wider community.

The perceived effects of the church at the local level encompass economic and societal factors as well as the presence and use of a physical church structure. According to Partners for Sacred Places, the average economic impact of historic sacred places in urban areas were found to generate a “Halo Effect” on the surrounding community in excess of \$1.7 million.¹ In addition to the economic impact, churches serve as gathering spaces for the community that extend beyond Sunday mornings. Partners for Sacred Places reports that for the average historic sacred place “Only 11% of total visits were for worship while 89% were by others attending an event, utilizing a program of the congregation, or going to and from a school or daycare.”² Partners’ application of social science-based evaluation tools and current information on religious organizations resulted in useful data for what was presumed to be purely anecdotal. Reports such as the “halo effect” help demonstrate the important presence of churches in communities to church members and to people outside the church.

¹ Partners for Sacred Places, "Economic Halo Effect," 2016, accessed January 2 2020, 2019, <https://sacredplaces.org/reimagine-your-sacred-place/halo-effect/>.

² Ibid.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CHURCH AND MEASUREMENT

Church as Biblical Institution

The local church as the proximate manifestation of the body of Christ in the world continues to be the standard by which much Christian activity in the Western world is gauged. Because society has conflated the institutional church with Christian activity, and bricks and mortar can be a tangible sign of God's work in the world, the local church functions as a center of that activity, and has also taken on the mentality of "if you build it, they will come."¹ Now churches have grown and developed into physical plants with enormous footprints, vast financial worth, and societal position as institutions. However, the term *Christian growth* implies activity beyond buildings or headcounts.

The most common contemporary form of the Western church hardly resembles the earliest Christian gatherings, which were small groups meeting in private homes. Paul's colleagues Priscilla and Aquila (1 Cor. 16:19), Nympha (Col. 4:15), and Lydia (Acts 16:14-15) are mentioned in Paul's Epistles and in the Acts of the Apostles as hosts of these early worshipping communities.² They took the Great Commission to heart and worked to enlarge the group called Christians.

As information on the growth of Christian communities expanded along with the institutional church, many societies delegated to the church the role of recording all vital statistics such as marriages and deaths. The role of the church in data-gathering is well

¹ Phil Alden Robinson et al., *Field of Dreams* (United States: Universal Pictures, 1989).

² Michael David Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books : New Revised Standard Version*, Augm. 3rd ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

supported by scripture as a necessary and worthwhile pursuit, since the Bible itself is replete with measurements and numerical data, guidelines, boundaries, and benchmarks: the plumb line (Amos 7:8), accurate weights (Ezek.45:10-12), first fruits (Neh. 10:35), the size of Noah's ark (Gen. 6:14-16), the structure of the Temple (Ezek. 40-42), and priestly portions (Ex.29:27).

Over the centuries, vital statistic collection performed by the church has moved under state jurisdiction. However, the church continues to collect much of the same information it always has, particularly as it relates to rites of passage and participation in sacramental acts (e.g. baptism or receiving communion). Despite continuous recording of rites, sacraments, and church membership, the church struggles to report on its growth or progress in language that is meaningful in contemporary society.

Historical Polity and Policy of The Episcopal Church

For the purposes of this study, it is helpful to understand the forces shaping how the metrics of growth and decline have been determined within The Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA (TEC). The historical connections of this denomination to the evolution of Western Christianity and to European colonialism, along with its strong parallels to the formation of the United States of America make TEC among the first churches without a state. Meanwhile, the Church of England (C of E) remains the church-of-state in Great Britain and in that role has been record-keeper for centuries. TEC is an heir to that recording tradition.

The Church of England (C of E) was born of the influence of the Protestant Reformation in Europe as it travelled to the British Isles in the 16th century. The Roman Catholic Church, from which the C of E split, declared who was in or out rather than the

people choosing their membership status, and many died in the religious wars that resulted from the schism of England from Rome. When Elizabeth I ascended the throne, and ushered in the C of E permanently, British Parliament bestowed on the crown the title of Supreme Governor of the Church, making the Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church, the only official state church in England. Thereafter, subjects of the English crown were members of the Anglican Church by virtue of their nationality and not by choice.

Governance of the C of E placed a high value on reason and democratic process. These organizing principles were reflected in the attitudes of the English colonists who arrived in North America, along with their missionary clergy sponsored by the C of E. These clerics sought a way to continue the fledgling church in the colonies without losing the trail of vital statistics and disconnecting from the histories of the families who had emigrated to North America. They also sought to maintain the church's historic succession from the Apostles, considered to be an unbroken commitment through the centuries.

C of E clergy in the North American colonies elected their first bishop in Woodbury, Connecticut, in 1783, and in 1789 convened in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to formally establish The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, better known now as The Episcopal Church or TEC. The location of this first General Convention (GC) of TEC in Philadelphia demonstrates another link between the story of the new country and the new church, as was the fact that several signers of the U.S. Constitution were also included in the Church of England's rolls of baptized members.

Among the earliest Canons in TEC are requirements to record numbers and types of sacramental acts and numbers of people in parishes. The colonists' answer to the C of E's role in the New World was constructed in the same context as the fledgling United States; thus TEC reflects the U.S.' bicameral, governance in its own structures, as well as the methods by which policy and metrics are informed and implemented. Two houses of regionally elected clergy and lay representatives gather triennially to review and create legislation for the wider TEC, known as the Constitution and Canons. The Canons are handed down to the regional level (diocese) and then to individual parishes in the diocese, where parishes attempt to implement the Canons locally.

Mandatory recording and annual submission of specific parish-level data without narratives was codified in the early twentieth century by the GC. Lack of agreement between a parish's governing board (Vestry) and clergy on the importance of the Canons often leads to difficulties in keeping consistent records for the parish. Like the U.S. Congress, the connection between local implementation of Canons and the intent of their legislation can be both a source of frustration and of unity, and both are reflected most often in the individual cleric's decisions about how best to shepherd their parish flock. The Vestry serves as the fiduciary for a local congregation and is called to follow the Canons, including the rules regarding church record keeping.

The continued use of the term *parish* to characterize the populational bounds of a congregation within the Worldwide Anglican Communion is one of many vestiges of historical connections, and is an example of the challenge of reporting who belongs to a parish when the geographical meaning of parish no longer applies. Since the Anglican Communion carries no legislative power over TEC or over other offshoots of the C of E

in the day-to-day workings of diocesan or parish life, the international stories of church growth and decline represent an enormous range of local parish measurement practices.

Modern Church Growth Studies

A recent Google search for “church decline” yielded more than 86 million results, and searching for “church growth” produced 294 million hits.³ Many popular publications like *Christian Century* and *The Wall Street Journal* pull data from the major research entities that study religion and its trends, including the Pew Research Forum on Religion, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), and the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership, to describe church growth or decline or trends in membership and attendance at religious services. Denominational publications such as *The Living Church* regularly cite statistics about church growth and decline from these sources.⁴ In using these data without taking church history and context into account, or without an awareness of the nuances of church record-keeping into consideration, publishers risk perpetuating narratives which are less than effective or accurate and may even be damaging to the message of the church at large.

The current Presiding Bishop of TEC, the Right Reverend Michael Curry, stated in an interview with *Harvard Business Review* that questions about church attendance and church decline are secondary to “whether we are helping our people—Episcopalians—to have living relationships with God and with other people.”⁵ The

³ Google search completed 12/27/2019 at 11:07pm Eastern Time.

⁴ Kirk Petersen, "Episcopal Membership Continues to Decline," *The Living Church*, 2019, <https://livingchurch.org/2019/09/04/episcopal-membership-continues-to-decline/>.

⁵ Ania G. Wieckowski, "Life's Work: An Interview with Bishop Michael Curry," *Harvard Business Review* May/June 2019 (2019), <https://hbr.org/2019/05/lifes-work-an-interview-with-bishop-michael-curry>.

questions about church attendance and decline may be secondary, but TEC continues to require those attendance statistics, and to rely heavily on the answers. Those data guide everything from individual parish budgets and hiring decisions, the numbers of Sunday School teachers needed, and, on occasion, whether a church needs to close its doors. If those data do not accurately reflect the state of the church, the decisions based on these data are not helpful to the mission of the wider church.

Church as a System

Everyone, including the clergy, becomes used to how things have always been done, and as practices become institutionalized over time, they are ever harder to shift toward a new aim. “The seeds of decline are found in our successes” could not be a truer statement about TEC in the twenty-first century, as it “continue(s) to exercise the same set of muscles while the rest of the body atrophies.”⁶ This quote from George Parsons and Speed Leas denotes that what works best for a church that grows in people and finances for a few decades is assumed to be what will perpetuate those same results into the next generations. They further state that practices meant to stimulate growth in this decade are often a refined and improved version of what achieved those results thirty or forty years ago, while virtually ignoring the changes in the social fabric surrounding the church.

Leas and Parsons, along with Loren Mead, were pioneers in examining the institutional church at a systems-level in the late 1980s and into the 1990s when they examined the history of Christendom and the role of Christian denominations in growing churches around the globe. In addition to Arlin Routhedge, the author of “Sizing Up Your

⁶ George Parsons, and Speed Leas, *Understanding Your Congregation as a System : The Manual* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 1993).

Congregation,” these authors based their writing on the idea that the church as an institution should and can grow, and that with the right conditions the institutional church will grow.⁷ Mead and others point to the need for reexamination of how church growth and decline is described, explained, and measured.

Perhaps the best-known component of any of this body of literature is the typology of parish size based on “active members” outlined by Routhedge: Family Church = less than fifty, Pastoral Church fifty-one to one hundred and fifty, Program Church 151-350, Corporation Church 350-500+. Kirk Hadaway of The Episcopal Church further developed these categories, shifting Family-size to 1-75, Pastoral 76-140, Transitional 141-224, Program 225-800, Resource 801+.⁸ It is important to note that Routhedge states that “the average attendance at worship over a one-year period” is only one way to measure “active members,” and “assumes that each numerical range represents a membership that demonstrates a commitment and maintains a vitality in both their worship and work.”⁹

In tandem with Routhedge’s logic, *Average Sunday Attendance* (ASA) is often used as shorthand for the number of people variously involved in a local congregation, even though it represents only Sunday morning worship attendance and no other church-related activity. Defined specifically as attendance at worship services on Sundays, this statistic is reported by TEC parishes on the Parochial Report (PR). Budgets in TEC

⁷ Arlin Routhedge, “Sizing up Your Congregation,” Congregational Development Resources, The Episcopal Church, [https://episcopalchurch.org/files/CDR_series1\(1\).pdf](https://episcopalchurch.org/files/CDR_series1(1).pdf).⁷

⁸ C. Kirk Hadaway, *Congregation Size and Church Growth in the Episcopal Church*, https://episcopalchurch.org/files/CDR_ChurchSizeandChurchGrowth.pdf.

⁹Routhedge, “Sizing up Your Congregation.”

parishes are based largely on ASA per Routhedge's categories, donations, the size and requirements of the physical plant, and the salary of the clergy and staff.

TEC Church leaders, such as the participants in this study, are increasingly aware of the disconnect between the ministry they witness in their parishes and the current narratives about its effectiveness. The repetition of negative press can make parish ministry seem hopeless for clergy and parishioners alike. However, some leaders take the currently reported statistics as a wake-up call: In the words of the Suffragan Bishop of the Diocese of Toronto in the Anglican Church of Canada:

If our own numerical decline means that we decide to get serious about reclaiming our apostolic calling to be missionaries to our culture and encourage church planting, fresh expressions of church, and reshaping our parishes for mission, then it's about time. If these statistics light a fire under us to keep re-imagining ministry in our neighborhoods in fresh and creative ways beyond the traditional parish model, then excellent. And if the decline means that we are more ready to acknowledge our own sinfulness (personally and institutionally) and come to God in great humility and repentance, asking to be led forward by the Holy Spirit, then bring on the bracing statistics!¹⁰

Many clergy, including the priests interviewed for this study, report they are confounded by the question of how to gauge "How is the church doing?" both at the local and the larger level. Some struggle to extract meaning from the metrics they are required to report to TEC in the annual PR, even wondering whether this bureaucracy is worth the time. Casual conversation with my clergy colleagues reveals their struggle to define, with any reliability or replicability, what is effective in their specific ministry contexts.

Skepticism about the usefulness of parish data collection, mixed with the imposition of

¹⁰ Mark Michel, "New Statistics Show Dramatic Decline for Canadian Anglicans," The Living Church, 2019, <https://livingchurch.org/2019/11/22/new-statistics-show-dramatic-decline-for-canadian-anglicans/>.

these reporting schemes from upper management can make it unsatisfying to delegate time and energy to reporting parish information on attendance and budgets.

The Church's Role in Keeping Vital Statistics

However, some congregations ascribe to the record books and reporting forms a sacredness similar to the Bible or "The Book of Common Prayer" (BCP), which may also unintentionally stymie closer examination of those records and reports. One study points out that documents published by or used by religious organizations contain multi-faceted and implicit theological implications: "Documents, whether any one is intentionally reading or invoking them, form social and political subjects, confer responsibility, and determine social relations; and they do this not so much by their semantic content as by the nature of the social acts they inscribe."¹¹ Parish Registers contain a record of the life of the parish summarized in terms of acts of worship and shared devotion to God. The names of those who have been born or died in relationship to the parish are in those books, and therefore the Parish Registers contain sacred moments, and tell one story about the worshipping and sacramental life of the parish.

In the early 1800s, the Canons began to require "state of the parish" reports, and the reporting form itself evolved over the next seventy years into a standard method. Most of the eighteenth century TEC clergy originated from the C of E, where reporting church finances to the Crown as Head of the Church had been in practice for centuries. Early reports from TEC parish clergy were long narratives of flowery spiritual language, leaving much to the reader to interpret as growth, decline, or other observable changes in

¹¹ Rachel Muers, and Rhiannon Grant, "Documentary Theology: Testing a New Approach to Texts in Religious Communities," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86, no. September 2018 (2018).

the context of parish life. The appeal of a fresh start with a new denomination likely informed the first data requirements handed down to parishes, which, in turn, shaped how TEC ascribed certain importance to particular data.

The standard Parish Register contains much of the information requested in the PR annually. Church Publishing, Inc., a company which bears the logo of and is affiliated with TEC, sells Parish Registers. Thus the Registers carry an official appearance even though any note taking method is acceptable as long as it conforms to the requirements of TEC. Parish Registers represent a single congregation's rolling record of events such as baptisms, confirmations, marriages, funerals, reaffirmations, receptions into TEC from other denominations, transfers of baptismal records from other parishes, and a list of all liturgical acts performed by that parish's clergy or members. The PR form is published by TEC and disseminated to dioceses and parishes to be submitted annually, and then PR data is aggregated by diocese and across the whole denomination. The PR includes ASA, most of the above data, and information about the number of church staff, parish income and assets, funds pledged to the parish by individuals, and numbers of members of various levels of engagement in the parish.

The clergy interviewed in this paper report being equipped with few tools for evaluating their ministries beyond these statistics imposed at the denominational level. Books about evaluating ministry often still rely on ASA and standard measures from the PR as the established baseline for a successful parish. A Mutual Ministry Review, for example, is meant to be used by clergy and their Vestry on a regular basis in place of a typical job performance review. Yet recent Mutual Ministry Review processes showed only a slight shift in focus away from PR measures and toward telling a more multi-

dimensional story of parish success. Any other tools the clergy in this paper have at their disposal are usually transposed and translated from a previous career with some type of performance metrics.

Primary Church Data Sources

A handful of major research organizations provide most of the baseline and trend data on which statements about church growth or decline are often based. It is important to note that each of these research organizations use some combination of religious, social, ethnic, or cultural terminology to distinguish groups, such as “cultural Catholics”, “religious Jews”, and “white Protestants,” because they label a person’s religious expressions in tandem with their nationality or other identifying characteristics. The use of these combinations is a reflection of the history of nations or bloodlines dictating which church one might be a member of, such as the C of E being distinctly based on nationality. These labels also point to distinctions in the social and ethnic composition of each denomination, e.g. “white Protestants.”

One of the major religious research organizations is the Pew Research Center. Pew has studied religion in the U.S. for decades, providing rich data on trends across age, race, denomination, and other similar categories, but the difficulty of describing these various categories is still evident.¹² Pew describes differences between how people self-identify versus how a church or denomination might identify them, such as when spouses attend each other’s churches but are not listed as members in both churches.

¹² Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life, *Religious Landscape Study* (2014), <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

Pew's most recent Religious Landscape study across all religions in the U.S. states sixty percent of those who believe religion is very important in their lives attend religious services on a weekly basis.¹³ Interestingly, Pew reports only a slight decline in weekly attendance in Mainline Protestant-identifying Christians, including TEC, between 2007 and 2014.¹⁴ In contrast, TEC's Fast Facts reports show an average thirteen percent decline in ASA between 2011 and 2018.¹⁵

Another major data source for church statistics in the United States is the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). Their American Values Atlas notes that the definitions of denominational affiliation have been murky in research on religion for a long time.¹⁶ PRRI's Executive Summary paints a picture of significant decline of white Evangelical and Mainline Protestants in the U.S. From 1976 to 2016, PRRI reports a decline among white Protestants from fifty-five to thirty percent of the general population of the U.S. Their 2016 study points out that three percent of Protestants are Episcopalian or Anglican.¹⁷

Basic demographics and trends in the U.S. play a major role in what is happening with churches today. While the "Diminishing White Christian Presence in the U.S." is detectible according to PRRI, there is a notable increase of Christians among non-white

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Executive Office of the General Convention, *The Episcopal Church: Research and Statistics*, <https://episcopalchurch.org/research/episcopal-church-domestic-fast-facts>.

¹⁶ *American Values Atlas*, 2016 ed. (Public Religion Research Institute).

¹⁷ Ibid.

groups.¹⁸ The overall aging of the U.S. population is strongly reflected in the aging of white Christians, meaning that because TEC is majority white, the denomination is showing the effects of aging in more concentrated way. In the 2016 annual meeting of the Religious Research Association, the president of that organization, John Marcum pronounced that not only are the Mainline Protestant churches in general in the U.S. declining significantly, but that the demise of whole denominations is startlingly close at hand.¹⁹ It should be noted that the research Marcum cites is based entirely on denominationally required annual reporting of recorded data, which would include the PR data. In order to bolster his argument proclaiming decline, Marcum makes a point of including information about the likely declining numbers of women of childbearing age in Mainline churches, as well as about declining fertility rates among churchgoers. Robin Perrin made similar suggestions in a 1989 article in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, pointing to shifts in cultural norms around sexual activity as a potential driver of these declines.²⁰

Marcum examines this impact further, choosing a ten-year gap as the norm for elapsed time between infant baptism and childhood profession of faith.²¹ Marcum gauges birth rates by numbers of infant baptisms and childhood faith professions, while Perrin

¹⁸Robert P. Jones, and Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity* (Public Religion Research Institute, 2016).

¹⁹ John Marcum, "W(H)ither the Mainline? Trends and Prospects," *Review of Religious Research* 59, no. 2 (2017).

²⁰ Robin D. Perrin, "American Religion in the Post-Aquarian Age: Values and Demographic Factors in Church Growth and Decline," Article, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 1 (1989), <https://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1387253>.

²¹ Marcum, "W(H)ither the Mainline? Trends and Prospects."

gauges numbers of youth and young adults of child-bearing age based on changing social mores. Given that TEC allows baptism at any age and many other denominations have other baptismal practices related to age, the measures using baptism as a benchmark are not comparable. Both Marcum and Perrin risk conflating denominational and theological practice with other societal factors, including cultural norms around milestone celebrations, and changes in child-bearing statistics.

Such a cross-pollination of cultural influence and basic demographics as reflected in measurements in the church is not unusual, as noted by Clarence Hooker in the *Journal of Popular Culture*. Hooker uses a sociological/comparative method for examining the effects of popular culture (e.g. televised preachers) on demographic information (e.g. church attendance, or lack thereof).²² By showing how opinion poll data interacts with subsets of the population differently in two different studies of popular religion, Hooker makes the case for delving into hybrid qualitative-quantitative measures for trends in social behaviors like membership or attendance. Essentially, Hooker endorses the use of evaluation tools and data from outside the field of popular culture studies, and summarizes how important it is to examine contextual factors in any data reported.

Marcum does describe the various ways that membership may be changed across denominations, such as through deaths, or as an indirect result of policy or polity changes that produce schism, such as ordaining non-binary or LGBTQ+ persons. Information about people shifting from one congregation to another, either between denominations or within denominations, is almost entirely absent, since such shifts are informal, at times

²² Clarence Hooker, "Opinion Surveys and Demographic Profiles: Toward Understanding Cultures of Popular Religion?," Article, *Journal of Popular Culture* 32, no. 1 (Summer98 1998), https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1998.3201_81.x.

undocumented, and the churches involved often record the departure or addition according to their respective denominational reporting standards.²³

In a 2018 article in the *Sociology of Religion*, Flatt, Haskell, and Burgoyne point out that stories of church growth and decline have not been well examined from the perspective of the members of those churches.²⁴ These authors discuss theories about the influences on church growth and decline and where those influences originate, whether from an economic model or other secular source, but they fall in line with other research in that they assume the metrics church growth and decline are reliable, valid, or even useful. As these authors draw upon various theories from economics and modern business, the authors reinforce the idea that such models are indeed sufficient to the task of evaluating church trajectory.

Flatt, Haskell, and Burgoyne focus on causes of church growth and decline, but neglect to dig deeper into the data driving these categories, as seen in their use of church records for their delineation of “growth” and “decline.” Additionally, diverse Protestant denominational practices of recording, ranging from inconsistencies in counting and notation to differing standards of terminology, such as “membership” “attendance” and “regular worship,” make clear that any assessment of causation is based on fallacious data collation. The researchers neglect to account for variations in church measurements beyond Sunday attendance which may, depending on the individual practices of each congregation and clergy person, be intentionally yet erroneously incorporated into the

²³ Marcum, "W(H)ither the Mainline? Trends and Prospects." 127.

²⁴ Kevin N. Flatt, D. Millard Haskell, and Stephanie Burgoyne, "Secularization and Attribution: How Mainline Protestant Clergy and Congregants Explain Church Growth and Decline," *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* 79, 1 (2018).

Sunday data. As study participants suggested, there are wildly differing strategies to make the denominationally- required data collected into something more useful or meaningful for their own purposes, not necessarily remaining faithful to the PR or current established parameters. However, the authors' conclusions about the external factors assumed to be drivers of church growth and decline point once again to the influence of using terminology from various disciplines in how decline and growth are measured. Definitions and roles change over time in any organization; theologians and biblical scholars study such changes, and it stands to reason that the institutional church should examine those changes also.

Former Alban Institute consultant Dan Hotchkiss points out that certain ways of measuring the various facets of “church” may “tempt us (to) imagine we’ve pinned down what remains a mystery,” when churches are actually more like living organisms that are always changing.²⁵ Similarly, Gil Rendle “argue(s) that the use of current dashboard measures of ministry are (sic) both necessary and insensitive. If we don’t measure anything, we won’t get anything.”²⁶ However, Rendle goes on to say that current measures are not reflective of current contexts, including sacramental participation, patterns of organizational membership, and general demographic shifts. “We are still counting members in a time when people who are seeking the church want help in being

²⁵ Dan Hotchkiss, "What Size Is Our Congregation?," 2015, <https://www.danhotchkiss.com/what-size-is-our-congregation/>.

²⁶ Gil Rendle, *Doing the Math of Mission: Fruits, Faithfulness, and Metrics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

disciples,” echoing Bishop Curry’s comment to HBR, and noting that defining our terminology is one key to reporting data that can be contemporaneously interpreted.²⁷

Terminology Matters

The difference between “members” and “disciples” is not necessarily quantifiable, and yet, there is a desire to be making progress in increasing either. Rendle tells a story about a family desiring baptism for their newest child in the same parish from which this family had intentionally disconnected. The congregation was so eager to connect with this family for the baptism, in part because it would be evidence of an outcome and a positive change to the congregation.²⁸ “Any hoped-for difference was sufficient” is how Rendle characterized the congregation’s hunger for something to measure, or something to show for their efforts.²⁹

Daniel Muñoz further explores the desire to show positive outcomes from institutional church activity, stating that within the Anglican Communion, “there is a new, broadly accepted, generally unquestioned narrative of global growth or decline.”³⁰ Within the universe of Anglicanism, the definitions of “member” also inspire significant and even caustic debate. The leaders of the Global South of the Anglican Communion, which includes twenty-five of the forty provinces of the Anglican Communion, and which are located primarily in the southern hemisphere, recently issued a statement that their region’s membership was the largest within the Communion. It was a statistically

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 21.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Daniel Muñoz, “North to South: A Reappraisal of Anglican Communion Membership Figures,” *Journal of Anglican Studies* 14, no. 1 (2016)., 74.

erroneous statement, based on geographical and political boundaries, and it distinguished between “active members” and “nominal” members.³¹

But perhaps most telling is the spin of the narrative, declaring that the Global South comprises “a vast majority” of the Communion, and that it is the place of growth within the Communion. Muñoz points out that the statistics cited in these meeting reports are not valid, in that the various Provinces (regions) of the Communion have their statistics received with different weights and levels of criticism.³² Muñoz calls this skewing an “alternative reading” of the numbers, which affects how each Province identifies as Anglican, and subsequently generates self-reinforcing stories of success for some Provinces and emphasizes the presumed failures of other Provinces. The resulting shift in power by the numbers and the narrative ultimately steers who will define “membership” away from the founders of Anglicanism. It should be noted that Muñoz points out the presence of a potential counter-narrative, one of slowing decline in Anglicans in Western countries.³³ Interestingly, Muñoz analyzed photos on websites from churches around the Communion to establish a definition of membership of what he calls the “inner circle” of members, meaning the people who are actively participating in the life of a particular congregation on a regular basis.³⁴

Linked with participation and membership is *identity*, yet another central question for Protestants around the world. Identity is closely tied to how growth and decline are

³¹ Ibid, 73.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 76.

³⁴ Ibid, 77.

measured, and may be externally applied or self-imposed. John Evans writes about the necessity of “tension” between groups as a way to build a sense of identity among mainline Protestants, meaning that one group defines itself over against another group’s self-definition.³⁵

For TEC, the first mark of “membership” is baptism in the Trinitarian formula. Because of differences in baptismal practice across denominations, baptism is the just the beginning of the “tension” Evans describes.³⁶ The World Council of Churches notes, “The inability of the churches mutually to recognize their various practices of baptism as sharing in the one baptism, and their actual dividedness in spite of mutual baptismal recognition, have given dramatic visibility to the broken witness of the Church.”³⁷ To relocate TEC’s mark of “membership” from baptism to something else would represent a numerical shift and a theological one. Furthermore, to codify a shift in TEC’s definition of “membership” would require a readiness and receptiveness at the denominational level, reinterpreting practice back into policy. It would mean that many clergy who have been reporting “membership” according to their own definition might find their lived experiences heard and valued in the process of shaping denominational policy for a new era. Responsive feedback from practice to policy would likely improve the trust level of parishes in denominational leadership, and could, as a result of good listening and good responding, reduce some anxiety related to the efficacy of mission.

³⁵John H. Evans, "The Creation of a Distinct Subcultural Identity and Denominational Growth," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 3 (2003).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ The World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (World Council of Churches, 1982).

Changing a significant marker of “membership” would take a minimum of six years because of the Canons regulating how these types of codifications can be made in TEC. The ramifications of defining such terms, recording with fidelity, and regularly observing other contextual factors could shift the way clergy and staff are compensated, the decisions made about church physical plants both new and historic, and how TEC interacts within the larger Christian community. For example, “a change in the Parochial Report in 1986 that asked for a count of ‘active members’ whose baptisms were recorded in the church rather than simply the number of baptized persons in the congregation,” which resulted in a statistical plummet in membership when compared with previous years, partially due to confusion about the new definitions and reporting requirements.³⁸ Any major redefining of milestones or markers will require extensive teaching of clergy and parishioners about the reasons for the change.

ASA is often how full-time parish clergy are evaluated by others or by themselves, formally or informally, making these clergy the most attuned to the pros and cons of using ASA as a primary yardstick. Other kinds of ministry settings are accounted for by dioceses, but rarely are their reports given the weight of parish statistics. In the current state of TEC and how it is evaluated, ASA is the implied essential measure for the church in general, more than any other ministry context or activity. Until parishes and dioceses agree to make decisions based on a broader range of data, parish ministry and ASA will represent TEC ministry in general.

³⁸ House of Deputies Committee on the State of the Church, *Report to the 75th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, The 75th General Convention of The Episcopal Church* (2006).

The conundrum of how to gauge ministry is not isolated to TEC or the Anglican Church. Other mainline denominations report similar trends comparing numbers of members to the various levels at which people participate in the life of a congregation. *The Christian Post* reported in 2010 that other denominations, including the Southern Baptists and the Roman Catholics, had experienced a reduction in membership over recent years. This points back to the issue stated in *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* regarding the schismatic effect of disagreement about something as basic to Christianity as baptism. But regardless of how membership is defined between denominations, major researchers like Pew report a decline in Christianity as a whole, contributing to the assumption that ministry activity outside the parish-level is captured in this larger category. The question remains as to whether ministry outside the traditional context of parish membership and worship attendance is reflected accurately anywhere in statistical or anecdotal form.

CHAPTER TWO

CLERGY RESPONSES

This chapter examines responses from TEC clergy regarding church growth and decline and how they are currently measured or evaluated. Within my research parameters, I attempted to find interviewees who represented a range of parish ministry, including the priest's gender and racial or ethnic identity, years of experience as a priest, reported size of the parish, rural, suburban, and urban locations of parishes, number of years since the parish was established. Seven full-time parish clergy serving within my northeastern U.S. diocese accepted my invitation to individual in-person interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for evaluation of common themes and areas of difference.

At least two of the participants have been lifelong clergy with little or no career experience prior to entering ordained ministry. Three participants reported extensive careers in other helping professions prior to becoming priests. Two serve as leaders of historic parishes. One priest serves a congregation which was established less than twenty-five years ago, and is the second priest to lead that congregation since its founding. One reported a desire to pursue priesthood in TEC at a young age but was delayed until the Canons changed to allow females into those ranks. Three participants serve in parishes as the sole priest. Four have priest colleagues who assist in their parish's ministry. Each priest was interviewed on the campus of their respective parishes.

At the beginning of the hour-long interview, each participant was asked to describe their current ministry context, including their recollections of their parish's reported or published statistics: ASA; numbers of baptisms, funerals, and marriages;

numbers of people engaged in Sunday School/Christian Education. Upon reporting these data to the researcher, the participant was asked the following questions:

1. Do you believe your parish has declined or grown in the past 5 years?
2. How do you know? Please explain the measures or evaluations upon which you base your response.
3. If you could report or record on your parish, qualitative or quantitative, what would you want to measure or show? How would you go about that?
4. Did you have a career in a different field before entering ordained ministry? If yes, what field, and how did you evaluate success or failure in that field?
5. What would you want the outside world to know about your church?
6. How does that connect to stories, both inside the church and outside, about growth or decline?
7. How would you compare your evaluations of your church to the mission to which Jesus calls us?

Responses

At the beginning of each interview, responses ranged from hope for changes in TEC resulting from my study to a faint skepticism that such change might be possible. Some volunteered specific numbers for the above data easily, while others gave anecdotal or non-numeric information more readily, such as the age range and socio-economic character of parishioners, the mission statement of the parish, the historic context in which the parish was founded, the number of years they had been serving that parish, and the operating budget of the parish. While all of the data requested at the beginning of the

interview were provided during the course of the conversation, it is worth noting that ASA is the only actual number required by the PR that these clergy mentioned early in the interviewing conversation.

When asked “Do you believe your parish has declined or grown in the past five years?” a flood of information came out, representing the range and depth of how parish priests understand their flocks and their respective calls to faithful ministry within TEC. Interestingly, the data reported to TEC and published online did not necessarily reflect their self-report about their respective parishes during the interview.¹ Two parishes reported increased ASA, two reported stable numbers, and three reported a decline in ASA since 2014. Trends in reported giving in six of the seven parishes did not follow the same trends as ASA.

A common response to the question of growth or decline was that normative Sunday attendance is no longer weekly but monthly at most, leading some participants to say their ASA is steady or declining slowly, but not representing the same people week to week. “People want hassle-free church,” according to Holly, when she described their declining attendance on big holidays as a result of space and parking limitations or scheduling conflicts with other events, rather than caused by lack of desire to attend church.² Each priest indicated the ebb and flow of numbers of funerals versus numbers of baptisms or incorporation of new people into the community gives them a sense of whether the overall congregation is waning or thriving.

¹ Research and Statistics: Executive Office of the General Convention of The Episcopal Church, *Study Your Congregation and Community* (<https://episcopalchurch.org>: The Episcopal Church, 2018).

² Holly, "Interview with Holly, an Episcopal Priest," interview by Bonnie Mixon McCrickard, June 30, 2019.

However, when participants were asked how they evaluate or gauge what they have just reported, their initial responses were that instinct and gut feeling drives much of their evaluations. The priest may not know all the locations of growth or decline within their parish, such as within certain segments of the congregation which meet outside of Sunday morning worship.³ Jamie stated that “feels like decline overall may not really be (decline).”⁴ All the participants mentioned the importance of getting to know their congregations well enough to gauge the energy and direction of the parish.

Institutional decline or growth is not necessarily reflective of God’s work but may reflect other factors that are not currently or consistently measured. Marty noted that past reports of church growth may point to sacrificing healthy spiritual depth for widespread effects on larger congregations. All the participants noted in different ways the importance of letting “the way we’ve always done it” die off or purposefully come to an end, especially when the priest senses a significant shift in energy or interest of the parish. This letting go can be an active pruning of programs, projects, roles, physical objects or spaces, or practices. Fear of decline or change, and, as Becky said, “fear of not being here” can give parishioners the sense that they gave their all for the church and now they will be left behind by the church.⁵

Rocky expressed the importance of exploring the culture of the parish regarding their needs for permission from clergy or other leaders to pursue new initiatives. The

³ Mark, "Interview with Mark, an Episcopal Priest," interview by Bonnie Mixon McCrickard, June 10, 2019.

⁴ Jamie, "Interview with Jamie, an Episcopal Priest," interview by Bonnie Mixon McCrickard, May 9, 2019.

⁵ Becky, "Interview with Becky, an Episcopal Priest," interview by Bonnie Mixon McCrickard, June 12, 2019.

history of unhealthy power structures disempowers the laity from expressing gifts or investigating opportunities for change and growth. Alternatively, a permissive leadership can lead to spreading the group's resources too thinly if not monitored. Examples of proposed lay-led ventures included purely social events such as hosting regular movie outings for young adult parishioners while providing child care through the church, a children's music summer camp, and adding a third lay-led worship service on Sunday evenings.

Mark and Holly described explicit structures for gauging what projects or roles should be launched, continued, institutionalized, or closed. It should be noted that both Holly and Mark have larger parishes with some paid staff, which often spreads the responsibility beyond the priest for decisions about program and project viability. Holly stated that ministries have life cycles, and that because this concept is well-understood in their parish, it is easier to attempt new things: "We are a 'yes' congregation," and described how all ideas presented in their parish are greeted with openness, but are only implemented if there are lay people who offer structure and commitment from the beginning.⁶ Those laity must also be willing to prepare a way to end the venture gracefully when the time comes.

Similarly, Mark described a matrix their staff uses for evaluating programs and projects within their parish. They use the characteristics of productive versus unproductive to describe whatever fruit comes from a particular venture, such as increases in numbers or depth of participation in a program. The perpendicular measure is authorized versus unauthorized, which they use to describe parishioners' efforts to offer a

⁶ Holly, interview.

program or accomplish a task with the consent of the priest and staff or outside of that consent. Within this axis, they acknowledge that many important ministry functions do not occur from within existing plans but are borne of spontaneity, of sudden and apparent need, or of an individual's own discernment of calling. Any project, program, ministry, or role can be mapped as it drifts from one quadrant of this matrix to another, which allows a more objective decision to be made regarding the sustainability of effort and energy for that project or program. This matrix removes some of the emotional attachment to and fear of letting go of "things we've always done," and helps parishioners see "the needs of others, instead of parishioners' need to be of service."⁷

"The Research Says"

Each interviewee used the phrase "the research says" in prefacing a statement about growth, decline, or trends regarding the church in general, but no interviewee cited specific sources. Tom and Mark indicated skepticism about the Parochial Report in general, and two interviewees purported that some of their peers are misrepresenting their parish's data by including other numbers in their ASA, such as weekday service attendance, social program participation, or ministry activities that take place in a location other than at the aforementioned parish. Comingling the data from other sources may be an attempt to show activity that does not result in changes in ASA, thus creating the appearance that the parish is not shrinking by the common standard. Because ASA becomes shorthand for declining membership, membership becomes a stand-in for quality and quantity of ministry that is taking place in a given congregation. Thus ASA becomes the unspoken default gauge for the achievements of the clergy person, and can

⁷ Mark, interview.

be a major determining factor in career clergy trajectory. The lure of accomplishment as measured in numbers is just as appealing to priests and pastors as it might be in any other profession geared to productivity. Therefore, ASA inflation is one way clergy can protect themselves from scrutiny, as in “why isn’t your parish growing?” and can raise clergy profiles regarding favorable positions, income increases, and other perks.

All participants who report they pay attention to ASA also assume that their peers are not tracking or concerned about trends in ASA. Mark and Tom consider their peers’ perceived apathy about ASA as an excuse for lackluster leadership; that which is not measured is not important, and vice versa. Even priests who claim they do not focus on ASA trends will echo the narrative of decline. Mark stated that the growth in their parish was “countercultural,” meaning they assumed decline is the normal culture across TEC.⁸ They believe the church decline is actually steeper than what is reported. Mark and Tom stated they believe this skewing is a result of clergy protecting their egos about their perceived success. More than protecting egos, all the interviewees alluded to their desire to teach a narrative of hope that is based in scripture and tradition, but also in response to a vague but pervasive fear among parishioners that the church is declining.

All interviewees clearly trust their instincts about where their parishioners’ are spending their lives in terms of ministry. Becky gauges a measure of energy or liveliness surrounding one ministry activity or another as an indicator of growth and decline of subgroups within a parish. Further afield is what growth or decline does or does not look like; Tom and Rocky both stated that they can see the changes in their parishes when they look at pictures and can see their goals for how the picture should look. Visual

⁸ Ibid.

representations can lead to quantitative measures but are specific to each situation and not easily generalizable for evaluation across different parishes. Muñoz's study of photos of parishioners demonstrates some of the problems of generalizing what is seen in the parish.⁹

Most of the participants had ideas of what represents growth or health of a church, but had a difficult time articulating new ways to measure or gauge ministry effects, church growth or decline, or other qualitative benchmarks that would translate church-wide. Becky mentioned that "fun should be a measure," along with a sense of something being life-giving.¹⁰ Rocky stated that "presence is key" and "playing together" helps in building essential relationships.¹¹ Tom talked about the value of parishioners making social connections at non-church events held on the parish campus and building on their curiosity to get people to come back for Sunday worship. In the historic context of Tom's parish, involvement of the priest and parishioners in politics at the local and national level plays a significant role in driving ASA.

Connection and relationship within the parish and between the parish and the surrounding community play a significant role in how clergy evaluate their parishes for growth or decline. Rocky reported a forty percent increase in their parish ASA over the course of three and a half years. They attribute this growth to intentional fostering of relationships, inside and outside the parish, using the gifts and talents offered by the parish as the initial linkage. Becky and Jamie noted that the impact of their congregations

⁹ Muñoz, "North to South: A Reappraisal of Anglican Communion Membership Figures."

¹⁰ Becky, interview.

¹¹ Rocky, "Interview with Rocky, a Priest in Tec," interview by Bonnie Mixon McCrickard, July 11, 2019.

on the surrounding community was their presence, and the potential consequences to the community if the parish were to disappear. Tom takes advantage of the historic nature of their parish for bringing people in, capitalizing on the curiosity of visitors and depending on parishioners to connect with visitors and make them into members. All of the interviewees indicated that people who engage deeply in Christian Education, hands-on ministry, and other kinds of relationship-building activities through their parishes tend to exude growth or potential for being “lifegiving.”

Of the participants that had careers prior to entering the priesthood, all of them voiced surprise when I asked about their performance measures in those prior careers. Holly and Rocky both described types of connections, such as linking a person to a specific service or program to get what they need. Holly mentioned “relationship, integrity, and trustworthiness across difference” as a measure of success that is more informative than a simple transactional relationship.¹² The implementation of effective policies and procedures was also described as a measure of teamwork and mutual accountability. Methods for motivating people toward certain goals were also among the tools the participants had used in their previous careers. When I asked the interviewees about their prior work-related skill sets, they each noted a possible connection between those skills and their potential use in their current contexts, but none were able to articulate that potential.

¹² Holly, interview.

CHAPTER THREE

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

Becky pointed out that she has heard many clergy express a hunger for “honest conversations about metrics and church growth.” I have attended many conferences over the past few years where the discussion spontaneously veers toward whether and how our work as priests really matters in the wider church and in the world. All study participants reported sensing that God continues calling people to minister in the world through their parishes, even if these ministries seem unconventional. Each of these priests were engaging their congregations in a continual seeking and discernment of their unique call. Jamie understood that regardless of institutional growth or decline, “people have a passion for the Divine being part of their life.”¹ What that passion looks like as it evolves may be a key to useful measurement in the church.

Perhaps most compelling are the issues of identity emerging as a concern for each participant, not just as priests or as Christians, but as to how their parish is to live out its distinctive ministry in its current context. If the church is a place where people connect to their passion for the Divine, to their need for church, to other people, and if church is a place where people prepare for ministry, perhaps ongoing discernment of those desires is a necessity. Becky identified in her parish a lack of unified parish identity that ties to a lack of shared ownership, specifically “a bunch of disjointed communities” who “care a lot about one another and want to make the world a better place and wouldn’t mind

¹ Jamie, interview.

having more people come join the effort.”² A concerted effort to determine the parish’s collective desired outcomes could be helpful to Becky’s parish, providing opportunity for the parish to set goals and measures and building accountability. Rocky also pointed out that “People aren’t going to give to a sinking ship,” reflective of the desire to encourage members to fund their parish’s activities.³ By clarifying shared goals and outcomes, a parish could demonstrate whether or how much the ship is sinking and could also demonstrate how increased funding from parishioners could right that ship toward its destination.

Because society in general and the religious researchers in particular have long conflated Christian living with the institution and practice, we have an opportunity to redefine who we are as members of the body of Christ and as constituents of TEC. In some wide-swath surveys on American religious life ASA is the primary data that is used to measure TEC, or it may be the only data representing TEC when the surveyors do not account for variations in how denominations define “ministry” or “membership.” While major statistical reports relying merely on ASA tell only part of the story of TEC, these external analyses also remind us that ASA is a construct of our own making and is therefore obliging us to reevaluate how our story is told. Gil Rendle says that people who have a passion for the Divine in their lives want to learn about *discipleship* more than membership.⁴

² Becky, interview.

³ Rocky, interview.

⁴ Rendle, *Doing the Math of Mission: Fruits, Faithfulness, and Metrics*.

Mission and Ministry

One concrete object that holds TEC together to some degree is the “Book of Common Prayer (BCP).” The Outline of the Faith in the BCP, ratified by the General Convention of TEC, specifies that “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”⁵ Many local parishes have developed their own mission statements, perhaps because they are unaware that being part of TEC brings them under the mission of TEC, or perhaps because they are convicted by a need to claim a local interpretation of TEC’s mission. According to the study participants, a clear and focused mission that is owned, proclaimed, and enlashed by parishioners is essential to church growth of any kind. To know who we are and what we are called to do is foundational to all measures the church might need.

Activities that a parish might undertake or identify with may occur outside of Sunday worship or Sunday School, leading Holly to ask “what is the rest of the life of the community like?” Holly recalled the example of a ministry of their parishioners to people in a local prison. The prisoners cannot by current definition in TEC Canons become members of Holly’s parish. Because the prisoners are not members, they cannot be counted in the PR in the same way as others, even if the prisoners minister to others through Holly’s parish in meaningful and otherwise countable ways. To whom or what do these ministers in prison belong, and whose mission can they fulfill?

Mark spoke enthusiastically about the feeding ministry their parish offers to the local community where many non-members of the parish prepare and serve the meals

⁵The Episcopal Church, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979).

more faithfully than many parishioners. Those non-member ministers and the people who receive those meals cannot be represented on the PR, but still represent a large proportion of the identity of that parish with a stated mission of being Christ's hands and feet in the world. If the mission of TEC is to restore all people to unity with God and each other, then why aren't the people who carry out this mission members of TEC by virtue of the mission? This problem points back to reframing "membership" to reflect who is demonstrating ownership of the mission and who is a member pro-forma, which would be an useful way to determine where people *are* invested in the mission as opposed to where they are not.

All seven participants reported paying attention to ASA because they know that number, along with budgets, sums up their growth or decline in the eyes of the wider church. They all stated that their parishes had experienced both growth and decline in a variety of other ways not counted in ASA, but they also noted that such variations beyond ASA receive less attention toward measurement and evaluation. A priest who notes significant increases in involvement of a particular age or affinity group, for instance, will attempt to dig into what is creating the increase, how to continue it, and how to celebrate it; yet this effort by the priest and the resulting data will ultimately not show up on the parochial report. Participants indicated that when they put time and energy into the places where they see the Holy Spirit moving, they may stumble onto ways to track that movement, but remain unsure how to codify or replicate such tracking.

Misreading and misuse of church statistics occurs not only in the media, as cited earlier, but also by prestigious research organizations, primarily because the terminology is not clearly or consistently defined. Becky said that the number of people who they

would identify as belonging to the parish is different than the number of people who seem to self-identify as belonging to the parish. Membership and belonging can mean something to a priest that is not envisioned by the lay people. Identity becomes foggier as the lay definitions of who is in and who is out may diverge from the definitions in the mind of their clergy person.

Four study participants, particularly Holly and Mark, pointed out that ministry initiatives that were parishioner-owned were most welcomed when those initiatives could be evaluated within a set structure or guidelines, and when they had lay leadership that would commit to following those guidelines. The added benefit of such structures or formats is that parishioners can more easily communicate to others about these initiatives with consistency, building expertise, and leveraging more resources toward this effort, and newcomers can be more readily incorporated into existing initiatives with these structures in place. The guidelines Holly uses mandate an ongoing evaluation of the initiative so that it can be closed when it has run its course, meaning that human and other resources have predetermined availability for future efforts.

The definitions of growth and decline of a church could be different from a lay perspective than for clergy, and might depend to some extent on the person's following the mechanics of parishes in TEC. The priest stands in front of or in the midst of her people and gets the wide-angle image, while the parishioners' perspectives will vary greatly based on where they sit, literally and figuratively. A parishioner who feels left behind by their parish because the components they poured their lives into are discounted or thrown out may be attuned to a narrative of decline. Meanwhile, a newcomer may

bring fresh ideas and energy, expecting growth, and seeking likeminded parishioners to welcome their enthusiasm.

CHAPTER FOUR

A DIFFERENT HERMENEUTIC FOR EVALUATION

The fields of public health, business, education, sociology, social work, and psychology have developed numerous tools to evaluate phenomena and change within organizations and individuals. Many of these tools are geared toward the health and betterment of society, such as micro-finance for businesses in developing countries, and strategic frameworks for effective public health and mental health program implementation.¹ The research behind these tools indicate an understanding of the importance of contextual cues and the nuances of human functioning at the bird's-eye and microscopic levels; social science can offer the church evaluation skills and gauges that might better fit the growth or decline of the ephemeral, the spiritual, the theological, and their intersections with the political. Furthermore, social science research is based in the methods of scientific inquiry, which means that the validity and reliability of existing scales and tools have already been rated. Translate the terminology from social science to church lingo, such as “member” and “disciple,” and the result will be workable measures that can provide quantitative and qualitative data regarding church growth and/or decline.

Practical Application

I currently serve as the first female rector of Phila Church, a 160-year-old TEC parish located near the transition point from city to suburb. The large churchyard

¹ For example: FiveTalents.org uses a proven model for development of resources and assets in developing countries; InsightEducationGroup.com offers tools for teaching career readiness in K-12 education; The National Institutes of Health and Mental Health generate research on effective health and mental health promotion strategies at multiple levels.

surrounding the buildings is one of the largest green spaces for miles and is dotted with memorials to 19th century manufacturing moguls, former parish clergy, and the working-class families deeply rooted in this neighborhood. According to statistics reported by Phila Church to TEC, official membership has hovered around 300 and ASA around sixty-five for the past ten years, making this a “pastoral-sized” parish.² Donations from attendees peaked as recently as three years ago, but, in keeping with reported trends during leadership transitions in TEC, fluctuated upon the departure of the previous priest.³

One of the appealing characteristics of Phila Church when I first interviewed with them was the fact that they did not weave despair or desperation into their narratives about the parish. Many parish search committees I met expressed a desire to bring more young people and more children into the parish, which they believed was necessary for the parish to grow, or even to survive. Others often recalled past images of full Sunday School classrooms and robust attendance; puzzled over how those phenomena dissipated and fearful of not being able to recapture that perceived success. I have seen visitors leave a church quickly after hearing stories of “what used to be” from long-time members, when those same stories could have been recast as positive opportunities instead of deficits.

Phila Church members may have had similar reminiscent episodes as other parishes, but Phila Church did not express that lament of perceived decline during their

² Routledge, "Sizing up Your Congregation."

³ *Interim Ministries Book I: An Overview for Church Leaders*, Second ed. (The Episcopal Church, 2007).

search process for a rector. Given that the loss of the previous rector in any parish brings a mixture of grief, anxiety, and excitement, I expected that stories of decline would emerge soon after the parish heaved a sigh of relief with the successful end of the search process. From my first day at Phila Church, I began assessing and building the capacities of the parish so that they had the ability, strength, and skills to move their ministries toward desired outcomes.

Starting with my first official meeting with the Vestry at Phila Church, I started re-shaping the narrative of the parish toward answering the “so what?” of their ministry. This step was to aim the parish leadership toward an appreciative and outcomes-based approach to reviewing its history and planning its future. The parish mission statement, “building relationships with God, the community, and each other through faith and fellowship” was amended with the phrase “so that...” at the end of the statement whenever it was read aloud, in order to encourage parishioners to think about the desired outcomes of those relationships. Over the course of my first year, the Vestry members moved from being uncertain about the purpose of adding “so that...” to the mission statement, to saying it together and recasting the narrative in a goal-oriented and positive light, and creating an environment more focused on strengths.

One key component which frames much of my ministry is a public health approach: changing the environment and culture in order to change the entire population in that context. Parishes are often compared to families because of the familial language found in the Bible, such as when Jesus refers to his followers as brothers. In 1 Corinthians 12, St. Paul’s refers to the followers of Jesus Christ as parts of one body who are interdependent and unique in function reinforces the concept of a parish as a single

unit. In addition to the language of the body and the family, Colossians 2 and first letter of Timothy warns the early churches about the influences of their contexts and environments and how their environmental factors can make going astray from solid teaching very easy. In the Pauline Epistles, Christ-followers are encouraged to make godly decisions despite of external influences. In much the same way, a preventable health problem can be minimized by creating awareness of the problem, dealing with the environment that makes the problem expand, and providing treatment and immunization to the whole population for a few generations.

The second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles teaches the essential interdependence of Christian life and urges building an environment that supports Christian growth. Coordinating the skills and expertise of each segment of a community can change the culture of a community with greater expediency than one-on-one efforts. One example of this model in the church can be seen to some extent in age-appropriate Bible lessons, repeated each successive year in more detail to match the learning curve, but these efforts tend to remain siloed and pedagogically oriented, from teacher to student, and not in an interdependent fashion. Compounding the education problem, in many parishes, participation in regular Christian Education is no longer a social expectation for adults, and in some cases it is neither expected nor available for children. This lack of emphasis on teaching and learning the basics of Christian faith represents a shift in the role churches play in communities and can result in a population that is lacking a basic understanding of faith practices.

Because spreading the workload of prevention efforts across multiple audiences and skill sets has a greater likelihood of creating community-wide changes, multiple

sectors of the community must each take on their share of that effort per their skill set. In a parish, these sectors might include teachers, musicians, and youth. It is important to note that the roles or sectors people occupy in a parish may be different than their paid occupations, such as a pre-school Sunday School teacher who is an artist by trade, or a nurse practitioner who serves as a lay reader on Sundays. The best scenario would encourage members to use all their skill sets within the context of parish life, but some people may prefer to keep their faith and their daily work separate.

Eclectic Approach Based on Experience

My prior experience working with coalitions incorporated a blend of Chinman, Imm, and Wandersman's *Getting to Outcomes*, the 12 Community Sectors and Strategic Prevention Framework outlined by SAMHSA, and the "Stages of Change" model initially promulgated by Prochaska and DiClemente as an eclectic approach to creating community-level or population-level change with measurable outcomes.⁴ These combined tools have shown utility in other endeavors to bring health of many kinds to communities and could prove useful in structuring the quantitative-qualitative measures for how churches reach outcomes. I am applying this multivalent technique at Phila Church in order to address the process and outcome concerns related to church growth and decline.

⁴ Matthew Chinman, Pamela Imm, and Abraham Wandersman, *Getting to Outcomes, 2004: Promoting Accountability through Methods and Tools for Planning, Implementation and Evaluation* (RAND Corporation, 2004). Substance Abuse and Mental Health Substances Administration, *A Guide to Samhsa's Strategic Prevention Framework* (Rockville, MD: 2019), <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/20190620-samhsa-strategic-prevention-framework-guide.pdf>.

James O. Prochaska, and Carlo C. DiClemente, *The Transtheoretical Approach : Crossing Traditional Boundaries of Therapy* (Homewood, Ill.: Dow Jones-Irwin, 1984).

The Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF) is a strategic planning method used in a public health approach change a behavior or consequence across an entire group or community. The method has been used in a primary public health approach: programs and policies that affect wide swaths of people instead of individuals. A familiar example of a public health approach is seatbelt use, meant to prevent vehicle-related injuries, and the many years of law enforcement, advertising about the risks and benefits of seatbelt use, and the changing of safety regulations over auto manufacturers and road speeds. All these factors combined have created a culture that generally endorses seatbelt use.

The SPF includes five phases: assessment, capacity, planning, implementation, and evaluation, all in the context of sustainability and cultural competency.⁵ The SPF is a way to examine and address the various factors that drive or create opportunity for a problem to occur.⁶ Since the SPF process is comprehensive, multiple sectors of a community must be engaged in all levels of the process, both to spread the workload and to achieve true cultural change.

For the church, the most essential and useful piece of these combined methods of the SPF and GTO is the identification, assessment, and building of *capacity*, which can be internal or external, individual or communal. *Capacity* has been adopted across a variety of applications internationally, including the United Nations Development Group, which states:

The notion of capacity development is no longer limited to human resource development, but rather covers a broader scope that includes societal and

⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Substances Administration (SAMHSA), *A Guide to Samhsa's Strategic Prevention Framework* (Rockville, MD: 2019).

⁶ National Community Anti-Drug Coalition Institute, *Handbook for Community Anti-Drug Coalitions*, ed. Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) (2005).

organisational (sic) transformation and the issues of national ownership, policy-level impacts, and sustainability. It includes the creation of space for and management of dialogues, relationships, and partnership; knowledge networks; and incentives for performance and accountability. Operationally, it no longer emphasizes outputs, but also processes and mechanisms that lead to outputs. Institutionally, it is at the core of the work of countries and national governments as it is embedded in national development strategies as well as sub-national development plans... The eight capacity components are: human resources; public sector accountability; access to information, development knowledge and technology; inclusion, participation, equity and empowerment; financial resources; material resources; environmental resources; and external/international relations.⁷

For Phila Church, capacity evaluation involved gauging the Vestry as to their understanding of their roles and responsibilities, listening for their expertise in leadership, and testing their mechanisms for accountability. The initial efforts to build those capacities incorporated training and materials for the Vestry to increase their knowledge and skills, and to support and encourage collaboration among Vestry members. Policies and procedures, another capacity area for organizations, are continually assessed in order to both protect the people and the fiscal assets from fraud. Additionally, the above mechanisms support connection to the tenets of faith such as generosity in giving for the work of the church, responsible use of resources for the good of others, and following legal and ethical practices as part of the larger community. Priests interviewed for this project conveyed an understanding of the need for impeccable church recordkeeping and reporting to demonstrate accountability to the parish members, the diocese, and TEC in order to maintain healthy relationships with those individuals and organizations.

Because multiple-sector representation is designed to help people see their organization, their challenges, and their assets through different lenses, engaging the

⁷ *Capacity Assessment Methodology User Guide*, by United Nations Development Group (2008).

sectors of a congregation is not unlike an exegetical exercise in that one's own hermeneutic is gradually identified and used constructively; in this case, where one reads the community itself as the text. To build parishioners' capacity for appreciation of different perspectives, I facilitated parish conversations to bridge the subgroups or "cultures" within the parish who represent newcomers, long-time members, young adults, life-long Episcopalians, and others. By building connections within the parish across these differences, the members have the potential to build their skills for working across difference in the wider world, and to strengthen their covenants made in baptism, confirmation, and ordination. As Holly mentioned, "relationship, integrity, and trustworthiness across difference" are essential to building a community that can meet its mission.

The nature of parish ministry often requires negotiation of egos and politics among and between the members such that some messages are better received from outside consultants. In many dioceses, a Mutual Ministry Review (MMR) must be conducted yearly for the parish and its clergy to give and receive feedback. MMRs can take many forms, but ours involved a retired priest and our consultant who was able to reinforce the importance of many of the lessons I was teaching the Vestry because of his extensive experience and by virtue of his endorsement by this diocese as an "expert" in congregational development.

Additionally, this year's MMR was this Vestry's first attempt at measuring progress toward their stated objectives for the parish, which were initially put forth by the committee charged with searching for their next rector. Objectives included increasing diversity, expanding Christian Education for all ages, and involving new members in

parish life and leadership. The questions about these objectives were framed in strengths-based statements: “We can rejoice about...related to the objective of...” and “What we need to revisit about the objective of...is ...” The consultant guided me and the Vestry together toward a plan to revisit and refine these objectives, set benchmarks, and outline processes for meeting them during the annual planning meeting next year. Annual repetition of the cycle of the MMR can serve as another tool toward shared ownership of the ministries of Phila Church.

Networks and Relationships

Building networks and connections is one of my strengths, and since my first day, I have been assessing and strengthening the parish’s connections within the neighborhood, city, and diocese. Working with the multiple sector approach helps groups and organizations to distinguish perspectives, roles, and gifts so that these valuable resources are used wisely and effectively. I began appraising the parish’s existing network by attending as many diocesan meetings and gatherings as possible and by standing for election to diocesan commissions and committees.

I identified that Phila Church, despite being pastoral-sized, has tremendous impact in the community which is not fully reflected in the current narrative of its members. Interviewing each Vestry person helped me discover their gifts and talents, as well as where they are connected in the community. Several parishioners also volunteered information about their own networks, such as the local senior citizens’ center, a school clinic, and a transitional housing program for families. By leveraging the passions of one or two members for that transitional housing program, additional parishioners were inspired to participate in programs and services to the wider community. The

homelessness support network is an important ministry to a handful Phila Church members; by communicating about this parish' role in this network, and by extending personal invitations to newcomers to participate, Phila Church's total investment of time and resources was leveraged into a measurably larger result.

To help parishioners develop their own knowledge and networks of fellow learners and Episcopalians, I communicate to the parish and Vestry about opportunities to attend programs and trainings throughout the diocese and community, such as a workshop on navigating culture change in churches, a lecture on parish budgeting, and an interfaith peace fellowship program. Phila Church offers adult learning opportunities every Sunday, during special seasons as evening programs, and on an individual basis when needed. The parish recently began providing books and teaching materials to help new members acclimate, to support families of baptism candidates, and to equip new Vestry members with proper reference materials.

Learning About Our History in this Place

Gauging the *capacities* of Phila Church required examining the history of the parish for clues to moving forward. Working in teams of two or three, Vestry members and parishioners on several occasions spent time doing "environmental scans," which glean information on the physical space as well as the ways that people view those spaces. The environmental scans used at Phila Church included observing, measuring, evaluating, reminiscing about, and imagining possibilities or changes for certain physical spaces of the parish.⁸ For example, one group of long-time members walked through the

⁸ Matthew Chinman, Pamela Imm, and Abraham Wandersman, *Getting to Outcomes, 2004: Promoting Accountability through Methods and Tools for Planning, Implementation and Evaluation* (2004).

entire physical plant of the parish assessing doors and windows for functionality, state of repair, sensory appeal, signage, safety, location, and emotional or historical value.

Another small group was invited to spend time examining the room previously assigned as the church nursery, which had been out of use for at least two years.

When one attempts to see a space from a new perspective, it is important to evaluate that perspective for bias or misunderstanding. In the SPF process, reliable data sources are examined in order to dispel myths and break through the “we’ve always done it this way” thinking. Questions posed to each group performing environmental scans included:

1. What feelings and memories (of all kinds) do I have when I walk into this space and look around?
2. What do I like/dislike about this space? Why?
4. What do I wish this space could be like – what would I like to change if I could?
5. What would be the easiest thing to change about this space? Considerations include lighting, flooring, color, doors, furnishings, etc.
6. How does this space connect with the rooms, halls, and other spaces around it and in the church? Are these connections easy or difficult?
7. How do you wish this space connected to other spaces?
8. What kind of changes could make that happen?
9. What activities take place in this space?
10. What activities at St. Timothy’s have/do not have the space and facilities they need?

11. Think about the future, perhaps 5 or 10 years from now. The larger Episcopal Church will be very different than it was in the past 50 years. We will be doing ministry in new ways for a new century. What kind of ministries could this space be used for?

Additional Assessments

Other similar exercises to assess strengths, identify themes, and celebrate the parish's history and milestones were done in 2019. Groups of approximately twenty to thirty people participated in a timeline exercise where parishioners were invited to notate events on the timeline of Phila Church from its founding and projected out to its 200th anniversary. These events or milestones included personal moments such as baptisms or weddings, community events, national and international observances, arrivals and departures of clergy and parishioners, changes to the parish physical plant, and changes in church programs such as educational series or children's choir offerings.

As parishioners shared these stories, the comments gradually revealed an awareness of connections with the surrounding community, of missed opportunities to invite new people to church or to help people in need, and of their need to let go of some past practices to make room for new ministries. By creating space to acknowledge and grieve the past, and seeing it concretely represented on a printed timeline, a more reflective historical picture emerged, and an appreciative tone arose in conversations about the future of the parish.

Responses to these questions posed in the environmental scans and to the timeline exercise tended to reflect a mixture of reminiscing and a struggle to imagine something different than what they saw. A chart of the questions and responses, along with the

printed timeline were posted prominently in the main fellowship space at Phila Church as a visual reminder of these important conversations. Members who were unable to attend the environmental scan program or the timeline project were invited to add their comments or feedback to what was gathered in those meetings.

In addition to the environmental scans and the timeline exercise, small groups of parishioners were invited to meet with a consulting architect to share their history and vision for Phila Church. In tandem with these group meetings, the consulting architectural firm completed a thorough analysis of the physical plant, including measurements of every space and detail, evaluation of the safety and quality of building infrastructure such as wiring and plumbing, checking the whole property for repair or maintenance needs, and documenting the usefulness of the existing facilities. Together with these data, the consultants were able to compile a long-range plan for renovations, improvements, and repairs which would make Phila Church potentially more user friendly for the wider community.

Weighing the Responses

The parish's responses provided me with evidence that moving into strategic planning phase for this parish must include adequate building of capacities, particularly for achieving consensus and shared ownership. These are two capacities identified in *Getting To Outcomes* that will necessitate intentional conversations about the nature of the parish as a community of accountability. These capacities are also tied to stages of readiness for change.⁹ Without accountability, no group can identify growth or decline

⁹ Prochaska, and DiClemente, *The Transtheoretical Approach : Crossing Traditional Boundaries of Therapy*.

easily, nor can responsibility and shared ownership be developed or expected. Without taking readiness for change into account, no capacities can be well-defined or developed.

Newly Developed Capacities: Effective Use of Physical Resources

Phila Church welcomed scout troops into a regular parish-space use agreement earlier this year, which allows the parish to claim a gain in both networking and in justifying maintenance costs for certain parts of the building. These community members found the parish meeting rooms more than adequate for their purposes, and the parish benefits from the community good-will, as well as from the endorsement of new families about their welcome and safety at Phila Church. As a collaborative effort with the parish, the scouts collected food for a holiday meal basket, which was given to Phila Church to distribute to a family in need, thus expanding Phila Church's capacity to help the community, and also leveraging these two local organizations in assisting a third group.

Part of good use of parish space includes hosting diocesan and area church meetings at Phila Church, which also increases the visibility of Phila Church as an asset to the diocese and the community. Hosting such gatherings requires the parish to provide food and hospitality services, which in turn increases the networks between parishioners and the wider church. These might include planned seasonal programs or dinner gatherings and fundraisers for mission work, all of which function to support healthy group process and to encourage networking.

Phila Church founded the nearby hospital in the nineteenth century and maintains this longstanding relationship even though the hospital has changed owners. The hospital has a nursing school for which Phila Church provides space for events, and the parishioners established a fund to provide financial resources to nursing students in need.

Additionally, Phila Church hosts the nurses' pinning ceremony and invites me to offer "A Blessing of Hands" to their graduates.

Perhaps the most concrete example of an outcome-driven process that is yielding results for Phila Church is the Welcome and Accessibility Project, which began with the need to make structural adjustments to the physical plant toward accessibility for individuals with mobility challenges; beginning with, an access ramp to improve entrance into worship spaces in our historic building. The environmental scans and timeline exercise mentioned earlier were designed to lay the groundwork for the Project by formulating questions and generating themes, as well as allowing for assessment of the parish's potential for a comprehensive solution to their accessibility challenges. I connected with Partners for Sacred Places at a conference networking event and discovered their approach to thorough evaluation and planning for churches facing similar obstacles with their buildings.

After I had several conversations with Partners, I invited them to present their method to the Welcome and Accessibility Committee (WA) and Vestry. Additionally, I leveraged my professional networks to find other consultants who could teach the Vestry their concepts for addressing the physical barriers to build entry. I encouraged the WA Committee and vestry to consider not only the mechanisms needed for physical accessibility, but the degree of independence we can offer to someone using those mechanisms. For example, if the doors are too heavy to open from a wheelchair, the ramp up to the doors will not help a visitor enter our building without assistance, and if a person in a wheelchair enters our building successfully, we will have to adjust church spaces for adequate clearance around corners and through doorways. These factors had

been largely missed during the environmental scans, but the conversations with Partners and other experts revealed those concerns while also providing encouragement to the parish about their capacity to overcome such obstacles.

To date, the WA Committee and the Vestry accepted the proposal from an architectural firm that was recommended through my colleague networks. This firm has worked directly with the Vestry and WA Committee, facilitating more than eight focus groups with parishioners to accomplish a thorough, professional assessment of the structures and their potential for improvements in accessibility, usefulness, safety, and overall appeal. That the leadership of Phila Church shifted in one year from a narrative mostly focused on the past, to contracting for architectural services to provide a bigger, future-focused design is a measurable sign of growth that is neither numerical nor represented by the ASA.

Parishioners who have recently had trouble entering our buildings because of decreased mobility have donated seed money in the past year to the WA Project, including donations over and above their regular giving to the church operating budget. The Vestry also voted to set aside monies for the WA Project within the operating budget and have used some of those funds to pay the consultants and architects. Their readiness to designate a part of the budget toward the WA Project, knowing that these monies represent a fraction of what will be required for completing the Project, is a signal of their understanding that improved accessibility is a win for the whole community, not only for parishioners with decreased mobility. This set-aside also acknowledges a wider ranging plan than was first envisioned when they called me as their Rector: the parish leadership has shifted from discussions of renovating the existing ramp without formal architectural

consultation, to creating a fully accessible entryway which will both improve visibility of the church and encourage community members to use the parish's facilities as their own.

Reflecting on ASA and Membership

In my first call after seminary, I served as the junior member of a three-priest-staff at a large, pre-Civil War parish in the original downtown of a small city. The neighborhood surrounding the parish has been revitalized with new businesses and increased traffic over the past two decades, but the church itself has maintained its standing as a major parish in its diocese for at least sixty years, with a reported approximate membership of 1700 and ASA around 400 over the past decade. The large staff maintain the significant historic buildings, operate programs, and serve the congregation with a \$1.5 million budget. Arlin Routhage would categorize this as a "corporation-sized" parish.¹⁰

Based on my experience in that corporation-sized parish, actual membership per TEC canons in a large parish is somewhat easier to track. When overall numbers of parishioners are smaller they are easier to track informally, but smaller attendance numbers are subject to more variation and therefore provide less reliable trend data; or, as Jamie stated "the numbers are holding pretty even, but the faces are different." This is primarily because in a larger parish there are usually multiples at every step of engagement; e.g. twenty people in a confirmation class, rather than one or two confirmands. These groupings require more points of contact with the organization, leaving a trail of information that would allow individual and group trend comparison. This means a potential parishioner would have contact with the clergy, parish staff who

¹⁰Routhedge, "Sizing up Your Congregation."

coordinate communications with newcomers, with lay leaders designated to make those contacts, and with the administrator of the parish database; all of which are an example of Mark's strategy for close following of newcomers.¹¹ At the same time, I have seen both regular attendees and the multiple visitors who enter and exit on Sundays without leaving a trace use the anonymity of a large group to maintain peripheral engagement. In a bigger parish context, programs and projects make up a critical mass of the parish's life, including large numbers of people who do not identify as members but who are active participants in those programs.

Membership and participation have far-reaching effects. These and other data from PR are published through various outlets by the Office of Transitional Ministries, the employment and placement arm of TEC, for the purposes of notifying qualified persons of available parish positions, or conversely, to notify a parish of potential candidates for parish positions. The data published about a parish searching for new clergy include but are not limited to parish ASA and budget, geographic location, diocesan affiliation, full-time or part-time status for the priest and whether they are seeking a permanent or interim priest, the staffing level of the parish, clergy salary range, housing and benefits available beyond the requirements of TEC, and ASA.

In my own experience, ASA, geographical location of a parish, and the parish's financial status play major roles in whether a priest will consider applying to a parish or position. In practice, clergy searching for a position may eliminate many potential positions based on measurable factors. For example, financial status drives whether a priest can afford to take a certain position and still meet their own needs. Becky pointed

¹¹ Mark, interview.

out that “being able to make a living at the thing that we often sacrificed a lot of time, energy, and relationships to do” is important. Current ASA and the trends leading up to it are interpreted by a priest to make significant judgments about the past and potential growth and/or decline of a parish, making ASA potentially the most helpful and yet damning statistic published by TEC when used for the purpose of matching priests with parishes.

The lore about “cleaning up the books” when one begins at a new parish position parish ministry was passed along in the hallways and coffee klatches at my seminary. This “cleaning” implies the variable recording practices between Rectors, who, by virtue of the Canons and ordination vows must translate the rubrics of the PR and Canonical requirements into the local parish context. Because reason and tradition are both the heritage and pride of Episcopalians, each parish is likely to express myriad subtle differences in definitions for terms like “member,” making voting rosters and mailing lists for parishes into potential social and political quagmires: who is a member, who can vote, who receives the newsletter, etc.

The topic of membership definitions surfaced within two months of my arrival at Phila Church when I reviewed the parish artifacts including rosters, finances, and the Registers in order to become more familiar with the history and makeup of the congregation. When it came time to approve the voting member list for the parish, I discovered several people who are deeply involved in the life of the parish were assumed to meet voting qualifications. Because of the delicate social and political ramifications of revoking privileges that should never have been bestowed, conversations with faithful people were convened to correct the assumptions about membership in Phila Church. The

people who are now listed as ineligible for voting or Vestry roles remain faithful to the parish in many other ways.

One possible response to parishioners' lack of knowledge about the polity to which they see themselves belonging is to provide extensive and intensive education. This necessitates parishioners' active participation in learning and then implementing that knowledge, which also requires an understanding of the stages of change: being informed does not necessarily or immediately beget action. Another local option is to establish and acknowledge other milestones and markers of engagement with the parish, which would allow people to feel connected to a particular congregation without making canonical commitments. For example, Holly noted that a few times each year, their parish uses a liturgy for welcoming new members who are not necessarily members by canonical definition. Holly also mentioned that the inmates who participate in prison ministry with Holly's parishioners should be accounted for in some way to show connection or affiliation with their parish. Adding levels of participation like these are not prohibited by GC or bylaws but could create confusion when those engagement levels do not translate across diocesan or wider TEC practices. The potential result is improved connection at the local parish, but decreased connection from a shared understanding of "membership" in a parish of TEC.

Loren Mead's seminal work on church growth acknowledges that levels of membership already exist informally. Creating this stepwise movement for people to connect with the parish might create a more welcoming atmosphere through lower levels of commitment, resulting in more lay people self-identifying as part of this parish. However, lesser commitment is often correlated with people placing a lower value on that

connection. Holly's note that people want "hassle free church" is a nod to a societal expectation that organizations will facilitate easy ways for someone to step in and connect, and to step out without giving notice or receiving significant ramifications.

Levels of commitment and milestones may also generate unhelpful hierarchies and cliquish tendencies in a parish. If there is already one dividing line between people who are qualified to vote and those who are not, does the creation of additional classifications also create more divisiveness? Furthermore, parishes must explore what reward or encouragement is available to move people from lesser commitment into deeper commitment. Current policy in the Canons and BCP holds that Baptism, the precursor to Confirmation, is the initial threshold for membership, while previous versions of the BCP retained Confirmation as the sign of membership.

Jamie stated that "what feels like decline might not actually be decline," which begs definition of what feelings are associated with decline in the church.¹² Growth of nearly all kinds causes pain and even grief over lost parts of ourselves, our hopes and expectations. Quite literally, a new viewpoint comes with the passage of time and physical growth. TEC internal lore includes the idea that parishes may decline in members and budget whenever their priest leaves, and that during the interim and first few years of the next priest's tenure a shift in attendance and funds will unfold. The departure and arrival of clergy leadership brings tremendous change that may produce grief in its many stages for its members. Arguably, the fact that the parish is not closing during the transition, and that a new priest will arrive to provide leadership is a strong sign of growth and not decline, even if this process is uncomfortable for all involved. The

¹² Jamie, interview.

response to the challenge of such transitions must include tremendous patience on all parts, but also significant teaching in the parish about the nature of grief and growth. Posting or publishing hard numbers of attendance alongside notes of positive and healthy activities of the parish might stem the narrative of perceived decline.

During such transitions, parishioners gather to set forth hopes and goals for the parish, many of which revolve around growth. Without a clear definition of growth for their own context, and without clear measurements for those goals, evidence of growth will default to ASA and budget numbers, and the parish's fears about their future will drive efforts toward that ill-defined growth, without ever gauging whether they have made progress.¹³ Fear of the future is off-putting to potential new members who do not carry the institutional knowledge. The repetition of the narrative of decline or a nostalgic lament can also bring parishes easily to a place of low energy and hopelessness as a result. It might be easy for clergy in new positions to believe they are set up for failure because of the constant comparison to the parish's prior experience.

I have seen community-based organizations determine narrow, specific objectives for connecting with new people, and then develop strategies for how to accomplish those objectives and have reliable, valid measures for those objectives. The objectives must move toward the goal, and the goal of the church is the Great Commission, not as a task to complete but as an effort to continue generation to generation. Churches exist not for themselves but as a body to carry out God's work in the world, which will never be finished until God declares it finished. The amorphous goal of continuing the mission of

¹³ Office for Transition Ministry, *Interim Ministries Book I: An Overview for Church Leaders*, Second ed., *Interim Ministries* (The Episcopal Church, 2007).

restoring all people to God and each other is itself a process to which Episcopalians commit.

The church, and TEC specifically, is not immune to a desire for productivity over process, as demonstrated by ongoing emphasis on programs that purport to achieve church growth while not fully defining that growth. Furthermore, the conundrum of how to gauge ministry is not isolated to TEC or the Anglican Church. Other “mainline” denominations report similar trends comparing numbers of *members* to the various levels at which people participate in the life of a congregation. Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics have experienced a reduction in membership over recent years. This points back to the issue stated in *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* regarding the schismatic effect of disagreement about something as basic to Christianity as baptism. But regardless of how membership is defined between denominations, major researchers like Pew report a decline in Christianity as a whole, contributing to the assumption that ministry activity outside parish-level is captured in this larger category.

Recommendations for New Measures to Explore

Based on my interviews for this project, there are numerous theological and Biblical themes that could be developed into qualitative measures for growth and decline of the church at large, of TEC, and of individual parishes:

1. Saying “yes” to the working of the Spirit, just as the prophets, Mary, and Jesus assented to the unexpected direction of God can be affirming for people and encourage growth through creativity and connection. Affirmation given and received can be one gauge for levels of trust and the exercise of faith. For example, a parish may desire to address the problem of homelessness. A capacity assessment of that parish may show

they are not equipped to attend to the problem directly by housing families in their church buildings. But the parish might provide sleeping quarters or a clothing program, while partnering with another organization to provide shower facilities and laundry as their contribution of support to the community. Furthermore, if that parish discovered certain members were willing to advocate in the public square regarding the issue of homeless families, the parish could use that capacity to leverage partnerships that lead toward a healthier community. As Jamie pointed out, voicing alternative points of view, lending voice to the marginalized in the parish or in the larger society, or broadening the public discourse on a hot topic can be difficult but is often an important role for TEC parishes to fill, and is a role that might be a void otherwise. Part of the “yes” to ministry initiatives and lending support to causes must be a parish-based discernment, because TEC values “testing the spirits” (1 John 4:1) for the whole community and the individual.

2. As a counterpoint to saying “yes,” the act of pruning, passively allowing certain efforts to die off, or requiring fallow periods may create space and release resources. Taking on new things requires readiness and acceptance of change. Pruning could allow for some necessary death and grieving of what is past and could reduce the parasitic drag of nostalgia.

Parishes often balk at the idea of getting rid of old materials, ideas, programs, or long cherished traditions. Priest and author Anna Olson points out that “the fear of being discarded themselves...(or) trashing of ‘their’ eras” prevents some people and parishes from hearing God’s continued call.¹⁴ Previous seasons of hard work followed by rich

¹⁴ Anna B. Olson, *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church : Freedom Beyond Survival* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

harvests lead many parishioners to attach their faith and their identity to those programs and traditions, much like people attach their identity to a career. Novel ideas and new community needs may require different capacities; to clear the path for new movement might include allowing or even requiring certain individuals to withdraw from current roles or ministry. Readiness as related to stages of change is an easily accessible measure which could be adapted for churches to assess whether the season is ripe for change.

The companion for readiness is timing, as the “shelf life” of a project or ministry may be limited by a variety of practical capacities such as financial resources, the availability or receptivity of a specific audience, or factors affecting the overall health of the parish. A church with a historically large youth ministry program may view a decline in participation as a reflection on the program, rather than considering the simple effect of the lower birth rates in the general population. In my experience working with community coalitions, groups which are anxious about a problem are more prone to choose a project or program as a solution and as a salve to their worry, rather than stepping back to consider the timing, conditions, and readiness of the whole community. Similarly, stalling can be a tactic for one or a group of people to maintain control of an anxiety-provoking change. Some longtime parishioners will experience changes in their parish like “a train leaving them behind on the station platform.”¹⁵ Clergy may need to adjust the pace of change strategically in order to bring others along and gather support. Timelines and calendar targets can become simple and helpful gauges for readiness and shelf-life.

¹⁵ Rocky, interview.

3. The sustainability of a ministry or venture beyond its founder can be determined, to a large extent, by the initial capacities for that venture. Jesus equipped his disciples, gave certain people specific roles, set an example, and promised the Holy Spirit's continuing guidance among them after his Ascension. Jesus used stories and illustrations that were contextually appropriate for first century Palestinian living conditions. It could be said that Jesus considered and developed the capacity of his followers and established multiple strategies to gauge and ensure their success. Two millennia after the departure of Jesus, the ministry of Jesus continues through the church.

4. Christian education, spiritual disciplines, and spiritual practices taught and utilized might be numerically counted and could be individually self-evaluated for their value toward personal and group growth and perseverance. Jamie pointed out that "being able to measure the number of...folks who have actually gone beyond their Sunday School understanding of Christianity...it's as important as the number of people in the pews."¹⁶ The ability of each generation to echo what they have been taught, and then to re-articulate it in ways that are relevant can be a measure of the depth of engagement with one's faith development. That same measure can tell us whether teaching ministries are adequate to the task and the demand. Also, Holly reminded me that a lifelong-learning approach is important even though much of the focus in church growth is on children and youth, because a "solid foundation in the second half of life" is what keeps people connected to faith communities.¹⁷

¹⁶ Jamie, interview.

¹⁷ Holly, interview.

5. Claiming authority and ownership of programs, processes, projects, plans, and property requires both clergy and parishioners to communicate well and stay accountable to one another, especially regarding fiscal and material resources. Mark noted that acknowledging the costs and changes that accompany growth, and reporting that data with integrity, can facilitate clear communication. Developing ongoing evaluation within a framework that is not judgmental, such as the grid Mark described, can build confidence and trust in the community.

6. Bearing witness to the fruit of the Spirit in another and expressing gratitude for that fruit within the community could serve as somewhat objective indicators of spiritual growth. The fruit might be demonstrable increases in giving time, talent, or treasure to help others. Increases in patience and forbearance might be accounted for in relationships. Parishioners that show kindness outside the church walls are allowing their lights to shine. These factors would require purely narrative, descriptive measures, but might be gauged in terms of overall cohesion of the parish.

7. Clear adoption of mission, scope, and target audience can reinforce group agreements and standards. Mark and Jamie both noted that knowing your strengths, and to whom you want to minister, and then developing that niche can direct resources and capacities with clarity. Mark continued, “[C]an’t we do a better job to respond to what God is asking us to do? Which I think is asking us to grow and to work more actively in the world and to strengthen the church, not to manage the decline of the church.”¹⁸ What is it that unites us? may be a key question around which all other processes could be centered.

¹⁸ Mark, interview.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHERE AND HOW DOES CHURCH HAPPEN

Today, style of worship remains important as a first impression, but not the deciding factor for joining of a church, or of any faith community. But to clergy in TEC, the preaching and liturgy, however beautiful and ancient, are only one part of what life in the church has to offer, and what the work of the church can and could demonstrate.¹ If the most important thing we can know is whether people have a “living relationship with God and each other,” it is clear that where people spend a couple of hours one day a week is not the only important measure.² What are the other locations or occasions where ministry and faith transmission could be witnessed and assessed?

The Case for Doing Things Differently

Clarence Hooker’s case, made from the outside of religion of “pop culture” looking in, for hybrid qualitative-quantitative measures could offer TEC a firm basis for straddling things earthly and heavenly when it comes to how well TEC is carrying out the gospel.³ The community coalitions I worked with had long relied on anecdotal information as to whether their methods were effective in their communities. If the data from long-used quantitative indicators does not demonstrate the desired change, it is worthwhile to explore what other data might be available to show what change is actually taking place, and how to address it.

¹ Marty, "Interview with Marty, an Episcopal Priest," interview by Bonnie Mixon McCrickard, June 21, 2019.

² Wieckowski, "Life's Work: An Interview with Bishop Michael Curry."

³ Hooker, "Opinion Surveys and Demographic Profiles: Toward Understanding Cultures of Popular Religion?."

When community organizations I served began gathering and examining other qualitative data to give context to the quantitative data, we constructed a clearer picture of what the community needed. Specifically, we were able to observe the individual, family, organizational, and community levels that each have the potential to support change. The problems and barriers to change were thus defined and therefore more clearly addressed and measured. Furthermore, when each level and layer of the issue at hand is teased apart, multiple sectors of the community can take their share of responsibility and action.

For example, one church I visited several times was comprised entirely of elderly members, and the narrative of this church's imminent death was evident. In their efforts to keep this church sustainable, the congregational leaders decided to build a gymnasium on church property for local youth to use for sports and activities, suggesting the "If you build it, they will come" approach.⁴ This congregation invested major capital without taking into account the data on youth in the neighborhood or any other factors that might drive youth activity in this gymnasium. Nor did they explore the efficacy of using ancillary programs or services to attract people to the church's facilities for the purposes of building a convenient pool of potential new members. If they had researched trends in youth population in that city, they might have seen that the youth activities the congregation envisioned were not an enticement for youth to step onto church property. Or if the congregation had examined who in their neighborhood would potentially benefit from connection with a loving and supportive community, such as a growing immigrant community, or children needing tutoring, this church might have discovered a more

⁴ Robinson et al., "Field of Dreams."

effective way to sustain their ministries. There is rich literature speaking to similar strategies for focusing an organization's membership, but that literature is not strongly represented in the church vernacular.⁵

For TEC, there is a similar set of challenges and circumstances in that people choose not to attend Sunday services for a variety of reasons. A tour of the Main Line outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania will confirm there is no lack of available or highly visible churches. Matthew 18:20 reminds us that the basics of Christian community as the church can happen almost anywhere two or three people are gathered in God's name. If the same people who do not go to religious services will drive great distances and spend hundreds to attend a ballgame, perhaps this modern reality indicates that church *already* happens elsewhere, such as during a tailgate party. Practicing one's faith in ways other than worship service attendance may be the single biggest area TEC should explore for signs of growth.

Church by Another Name

Pew Researchers found in 2017 that Americans report not attending church services primarily because they "practice their faith in other ways," "dislike religious services/congregations," or for "logistical reasons" over which any given congregation does not have control, such as an individual's schedule or mobility issues.⁶ With thirty-seven percent of survey respondents claiming ways of expressing their faith outside of

⁵ Hooker, "Opinion Surveys and Demographic Profiles: Toward Understanding Cultures of Popular Religion?."

⁶ Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life, *Why Americans Go (and Don't Go) to Religious Services* (Pew Research Center, 2017), accessed December 28, 2019, https://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/pf-08-01-18_religious-services-00-03/.

church services, we can see how that number is reflected in ASA. We can also see the absence of accounting for those other times or occasions when faith is expressed. To measure what is missing as much as we measure what is present is a daunting challenge.

And as Dan Hotchkiss notes, the comfort of measuring what is readily accountable may lull us into thinking the job of evaluation is complete.⁷ The church at large can no longer assume the ambient culture supports ASA as an adequate or accurate measure of “how the church is doing.” Additionally, the loss of primacy of the church in contemporary culture in the U.S., particularly how the church is no longer the primary option for where to spend a Sunday morning has resulted in a denial of the role that privilege has played in how the church evaluates itself.⁸

If ASA remains the primary measure of success for the church, then the Suffragan Bishop of Toronto is willing to accept that changes are needed.⁹ However, if we find other measures of efficacy beyond Sunday attendance and parish budgets, we will probably find what conditions make other kinds of participation in church community more likely and more life-giving. All participants in this study had ideas about what might demonstrate growth in their particular parishes beyond ASA and finances. For example, something as simple as self-reporting of participation of all attendees and not just visitors would provide data to map trends of attendance and categories of attendees. Regular church participants might look at the sign-in sheet to help them spot visitors.

⁷ Congregational Consulting Group, *Five Lies We Like to Tell About Church Growth*, 2018, <https://www.congregationalconsulting.org/five-lies-we-like-to-tell-about-church-growth/>.

⁸ A Google search on January 18, 2020 for “things to do on a Sunday” yielded 1.1 Billion results.

⁹ Mark Michel, “New Statistics Show Dramatic Decline for Canadian Anglicans,” *The Living Church*, no. November 2019 (2019), <https://livingchurch.org/2019/11/22/new-statistics-show-dramatic-decline-for-canadian-anglicans/>.

Since some people attend church services only for special holidays, their level of engagement in terms of monetary support of their parish or their self-identification with the parish might be both mapped and nurtured to a higher level. With some encouragement and training, the observations of trend data might lead to a stronger culture of laity building relationships to draw new people further into the parish life.

Mark described a weekly process with the parish staff to evaluate recent attendees for trends to indicate next steps in increasing their engagement with the parish, especially focusing on connecting newcomers. Based on their level of engagement, the clergy and staff are intentional about encouraging those people toward the next level. Mark firmly believes this process works toward building overall engagement in the parish, resulting in increases in both ASA and parishioner donations to the parish. This activity amounts to capacity-building in the language of social science; building connections among participants, sharing human and physical resources, and leveraging existing relationships toward cultural changes.

CHAPTER SIX

PREPARING TO EVALUATE

Part of what appeals to me about TEC is the orderliness and structure that is maintained by representative governance and balanced with thoughtful theology. The structures are generally formed through collective legislative actions and are not imposed from above, which means the codes by which TEC parishes operate are part of an agreement to a common understanding of church. I believe following that common understanding is important for consistency and reliable data, much like the consistency of the prayers and liturgies used everywhere the BCP is found. If changes need to be made within our common understanding, then conversation and healthy debate using all the tools of intellect and history that God has given must be a priority over individual decisions. In other words, a parish should not go rogue but rather follow the processes in place for making systemic change.

The How-To Guide for Parish Evaluation

I learned a great deal about the parish I serve and about my leadership style since I began implementing these processes. Based on that learning, here are some recommendations for ways to take this process into other churches, including other denominations. Some of my recommendations are not what I did, but what I see would have worked better in retrospect. It should be noted that I initiated these processes at the beginning of my current parish position. Taking on these different methods of evaluation are possible later in one's tenure in a church, but some adjustment will be necessary for both clergy and members to step out of established patterns and routines in order to see the parish in a different way.

Suggested reading for TEC clergy who want to explore the methods for measurement described in this study begin with “An Outline of the Faith” in the historic documents.¹ For all denominations, “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)” published by the World Council of Churches can provide some comparative study across other traditions about these three settled aspects of Christian life, and may offer some ideas to distinguish one’s own hermeneutic.² This is an essential step toward cultural competence, with *culture* referring to denomination, regional organization, and parish or congregation as much as to the dominant culture of the church’s locale. I also found Speed Leas and George Parsons’ *Understanding Your Congregation as a System*, Gil Rendle’s *Doing Church By the Numbers* and Anna Olson’s *Claiming Resurrection in a Dying Church* offer some excellent ideas on how to turn church-y words into broader terms without diminishing the theological framing.

The next layer of reading includes the *Coalition Primer* series from Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, exploring the University of Kansas Community Tool Box, and scanning the sections on capacity in *Getting To Outcomes* by Chinman, Imm, and Wandersman. It will be essential for the reader to translate the terminology into church lingo, possibly starting with substituting *parish* or *congregation* for *coalition*, but this shift should be easier after reading the above systems-level information on evaluation. Better still, look in the community for a coalition or organization that appears to be using some of these approaches, such as one that is addressing community health

¹ The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

² Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.

issues. Experience with the potentially vast array of community partners, along with participating in the planning and implementation phase in a coalition can demonstrate how the process should be tailored to each community.

In tandem with reading the above materials, it is also imperative to learn as much about the congregation as possible. This may seem obvious, but clergy do well to remember that when they begin a new ministry position, they have the freshest perspective on their congregation, along with, hopefully, plenty of opportunities to hear the stories the members are eager to tell. It is much less awkward to get to know people at the beginning by taking advantage of the newness of the relationship. Additionally, this is the time to ask as many questions as necessary for a thorough understanding of how the parish *works*, because you will also begin to hear what does *not work*. For clergy with some tenure in their current congregation, efforts to get to know afresh the members and the systems may be met with resistance but can be framed as a spiritual renewal process for the whole body of the church.

Step One: Clergy should focus on being culturally competent to assess their context and to notice bias. For example, my first parish position as an ordained person was in a large church in a small city where I already knew the culture and people well, while my second position is in a small church in an ethnic neighborhood in transition, within a large city. One major similarity was the number of parishioners who had grown up in each parish and aged in place. I became aware of my assumptions about people never moving when I compared them to my own reasons for and experiences of moving away, which in turn changed how I heard parishioners' stories about *their* church. I had a

deeper understanding of parishioners' sense of ownership and belonging to one parish their entire lives, and a sensitivity to their lack of exposure to other ways of *being church*.

Step Two: Listening and making note of themes and threads in the stories the congregation shares with their minister is critical. Clergy should compare those stories to the stories they would tell among clergy colleagues, and to newcomers or visitors.

Considering and detailing the cues that clergy already use to gauge "how the church is doing" will be an important part of this reflection. This can be accomplished with keeping a journal and discussions with a clergy colleague group or a spiritual director. The questions used in this study for the interviews would provide clergy some cues for what to focus on, such as "If you could report or record on your parish, qualitative or quantitative, what would you want to measure or show? How would you go about that?"

Step Three: Familiarity with the governing documents for the church at the local, regional, and denominational level is important. Clergy should examine the secular legalities such as bylaws or articles of incorporation, and any financial systems that are in place. An understanding of the basic operations of a church, however non-spiritual they may seem, is part of ministry in a local context. These mechanisms are also capacities by which one can gauge readiness for change and are the components that allow the parish to interface with the outside world and to promote good stewardship of the parish's resources, material and human. The people, processes, and mechanisms by which the business activities of the church take place can provide a sense of the parish as a whole system.

Step Four: The congregation needs a basic understanding of the bigger picture, of their judicatory, and denomination so that they have a sense of playing a role in the wider

world. Practicing exercises with lay leaders, such as timelines and environmental scans, can help them see themselves through the eyes of visitors, neighbors, and the next generation. These critical reflection activities and conversations will assist them in defining their unique identity as part of the Body of Christ. Also, in my experience, these activities will aid the clergy in learning about the congregation's fears about the future, and will bolster members' trust in their minister to guide that journey, both faithful to what the parish has been and to what it will be.

Step Five: Clergy should step back on occasion and ask themselves and perhaps a few key parish leaders if the pacing is right. This pause allows an assessment of readiness for change, and acknowledges that for both clergy and congregation, transition to a new position is a challenging process. Shelf-life of projects and ideas, along with the calendar will help with determining readiness also.

Ministry Outside the Parish

This study examined parish priests' responses to questions about church growth and decline, while also pointing to the need to establish useful and reliable evaluation tools and methods for non-parochial ministry. The processes used in this project assumed a physical plant as a base of operations, and a congregation as the population with whom the processes were implemented. Again, cultural competence leads the process whereby the *culture* will include the population with whom the clergy interact, both the steady presences and the transient figures, as well as the physical setting and the fixed components of the context for ministry. Discerning who constitutes the *parish* may reveal many opinions about who the clergy are expected to serve. For example, a chaplain for law enforcement may regularly interact with police officers but may also have brief

contact with the general public in very difficult settings and situations. The *culture* of law enforcement will be an important piece to learn, along with some understanding of the communities they serve, and the chaplain's role expectations for themselves.

The story of "TEC is dying" or some variation is already in the public pedagogy in the United States and much Euro-centric culture: all seven interviewees mentioned skepticism about the future of TEC, either claiming the skepticism as their own or as secondhand information from fellow clergy, church members, or the broader community. Perhaps the narratives of decline more broadly refer to the decline of European descent-majority Christianity rather than a simply numerical decline of persons claiming Christian as their identity in some form. A narrative of decline of a major institution or entity is not new to the church at large. Such narratives, true or fictional, tend to stir up fear among those who are in positions of perceived power.

If the life of the church takes place in a myriad of other ways and times beyond Sunday worship, then ASA and budget are two among many markers useful for gauging the potential for growth or decline of a parish, or of evaluating the success of that parish's clergy as it pertains to growth or decline. Until and unless the church has more accurate, consistent, replicable, and useful data to judge church growth and decline, we will perpetuate a method that does not give the institutional church much hope to appreciate its impact. If the church-at-large is to be the body of Christ in the world, then this narrative of a dying church must be rebutted by a proclaimed theology of a Christ that rises from and conquers death. Regardless of the drivers for changing how TEC evaluates itself, there is a tremendous need for a narrative that offers hope to people inside the church as well as outside.

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