

From the Chair of the Search Committee

Surveys tend to spin up the analytical nature in many of us (including myself) which I suppose is fine as long as our attempt to analyze is not also driven by our desire to *know* something too definitively and to know whether that something fits within our personal agendas, biases and desires. There is some risk we take in limiting the full implications of these collective 349 survey voices the moment an individual or group starts to put words to what we think these results are telling us. But moving forward with some analysis, we must. Let's pray that it is done in a spirit of open discernment and discerned in relationship.

And so here is but one attempt to share some key findings. I follow this with something closer to an Executive Summary - a simple description of the context and some selected takeaways from the data. What is infinitely more important is that we view this survey as only the *beginning* of a conversation – a conversation that must continue in our community and especially with our next rector.

We seem to be diverse in our perspectives. The consultant who helped us interpret the survey results had one comment that seemed to stand out among others – St. B's is uniquely diverse in our perspectives. And nowhere was this made clearer than in our response to the question on our feelings about scripture as the literal word of God. I suspect that the very tendency for some in our parish to want to “unpack” or alter the language to that question, while others simply take the question at face value and require nothing further is, in itself, a reflection of our diverse perspectives.

As for the responses themselves to this question, 36% of our congregation landed near the middle, generally ambivalent or moderate. Further out on either extreme, 33% disagree and 30% agree. I see collective balance in this result. To be balanced is to sometimes hold opposites in tension. This is difficult, if not impossible, for most churches to attempt. I am inclined to think the results of this question represent St. B's, but I am not suggesting whether that should be viewed as a positive or a negative. Perhaps it is most important to note that a particular theological perspective on one side or the other is a “non-factor” in determining church strength as seen in the 1,400 church responses to this survey.

Do we (or new visitors) struggle to understand our collective purpose or identity? As an example, the consultant suggested that the sense of purpose at St. B's is scattered very broadly as indicated by our response to church priorities. Does this mean that we are struggling for a collective identity? The consultant wondered if the purpose of our church should be made clearer while reminding us that it is difficult to do many things well. Again, no prescription here, just examples of questions for us to continue to include in our conversations.

Children's Ministry and Music Ministry – Additional Examples of Context and Conversation? Our survey results indicated there is not much additional energy we want put in each of these ministries. There is a reasonable case to be made that this is because we already view these ministries to be of high quality. Children's Ministry ranked 15th out of 17 priorities and for most churches in the benchmark this is usually #1 or #2. Music came in 17th. These may be examples of survey elements we need to continue to collectively discern as to what we think these results are telling us and any implications.

Good News/Bad News? The survey wants to place us in the “Transformation” quadrant – high energy, high satisfaction. This tempts us to celebrate that we are in the “best” place of all possible results. However, the consultant rightly pointed out in my view that there is no such thing as stasis. If we tend to only hold on to same-state, it will result in the *opposite* of growth – spiritually and physically. It was noted that progress requires risk-taking and a tolerance for failure. This could be interesting space to explore with the next rector.

There is much more information in the survey, including plotting that attempts to give us labels like “centrist” on dimensions of adaptable/settled and progressive/conservative, but, as for me, I am not ready just yet to wear any of these unavoidably reductionist labels.

And so, let's keep the conversation going...

The Executive Summary of the Parish Survey

One of the primary benefits from the survey tool is that it yields data that is benchmarked (comparative) against over 1,400 churches in the last six years. The respondents in the benchmark set were primarily Episcopal, Lutheran, Church of Christ and a few other denominations. The overwhelming majority were churches going through clergy transition seasons like the one St. B's is in now. While looking at survey results, it is important to remember that many of the results are presented in comparison to the benchmark and in the context of the survey more than they are absolutes (see my earlier examples on results for music ministry and children's ministry).

- Very high response rate. The formal survey indicated a 71% response rate as a percentage of our average attendance. But this includes the population that was not eligible (those under the age of 16). Exclude the ineligible population and our response rate was over 90% against a stretch goal of 70%. Well done St. B's.
- High levels of satisfaction and energy at St. B's. However, the survey did not identify any clear drivers of that satisfaction and energy.
- Our top priorities for additional energy: 1. Develop spiritual generosity to financially support church ministries, 2. Develop ministries that work towards healing those broken by life circumstances, 3. Develop a comprehensive strategy to reach new people, and 4. Create more opportunities for people to form meaningful relationships. It may be important to note that even though they were in the top four, against the benchmark, our desire for healing ministries and strategies to reach new people were only average. Our desire for financial stewardship and meaningful relationships were not just in the top four but also very high as compared to the benchmark. There were also some variances to priorities by age that could be worth exploring.
- Our Spiritual Vitality is very high. How we connect our faith to all aspects of our life is remarkably high relative to other churches similar to us. We are nearly 90th percentile of church members reporting they do daily devotions.
- Critical Abilities for the Next Rector. Preaching and Strategic Leadership came in #1 and #2 respectively, but our desire for these abilities was average as compared to the responses from most churches.

On December 4, Fr. Christian plans to moderate a fuller discussion on the survey results and the entire survey results will be shared at that time and made widely available. The Search Committee is also exploring community interest in focus groups related to further exploration of the survey results.

This survey is an important step in telling the story of St. B's to candidates discerning a call as our next rector. Thank you



Joe Flynn
Search Committee Chair