

## **“Lots of Happy”: Growth and Vitality at St. Andrew’s, McKinney, Texas**

**Penny Long Marler  
Samford University**

In a little over six years, St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in McKinney, Texas, grew from a small home Bible study to a lively worshipping community meeting in the YMCA’s gym to a substantial congregation in its own sanctuary-cum-parish hall — complete with educational and office space, a large kitchen, parking, and ample acreage for future growth. A few months after moving into its new building, the 9:15 and the 11:00 Sunday morning services are comfortably full. Classroom space for Children’s Church is already cramped for nursery through toddlers, preschoolers through first grade, and second through fifth grades. And on Sundays, the narthex is a bustling center of activity as coffee, doughnuts, and juice are served; outreach and other ministry events and activities are promoted and volunteers enlisted; and early worshippers linger to chat and catch a conversation with friends—and even tardy family members—as they arrive for the next service. That’s not always easy, however, because the parking lot won’t quite hold all their cars. Luckily, St. Andrew’s befriended the private preschool next door and can use their lot in a pinch on Sundays.

This report chronicles the growth of St. Andrew’s via a number of sources: St. Andrew’s participation and giving trends from 2005-2011; U.S. census data and other psycho-demographic information about the local community; interviews of key informants, including diocesan staff and the vicar; focus groups of vestry members, new members, and staff; and participant-observation of worship services and children’s church. The congregation’s story is necessary for a full understanding of its growth and current vitality. Indeed, the support of the Diocese of Dallas, including 11 acres of prime property in the middle of a large (and growing) suburban development about 30 miles outside of Dallas, and the initial full support of a church planter and later a complementary associate, was critical. St. Andrew’s would not exist as a congregation without these baseline resources. But land and money do not always yield a successful church start. In this case, the secret lies in the kind of clergy that support secured; the mix of people, resources, and needs the particular context provided; and the temper, tolerance, and gifts of laity who were drawn into this new congregation’s happy momentum.

### **Preparation Is Everything: The Story of St. Andrew’s**

As its website relates, “St. Andrew’s came into being through the vision and commitment of the Diocese of Dallas, its Bishop, the Rt. Rev. James Stanton and the Church Planting Commission of the Diocese of Dallas.” In May 2005, the Reverend Mike Michie was called as the founding Vicar of a new church plant in McKinney, Texas. At the time, Mike was the Vicar of a small, primarily Nigerian, congregation in northwest Austin. “A real fixer-upper,” he recalls. Mike’s own background, in fact, recommended him to both positions.

Although Mike was raised and confirmed an Episcopalian, he says that he “came to faith at a Christian rock and roll concert in high school.” Then he attended Oral Roberts University where he met his wife, Laurie. The two married and got involved in an African-American church plant in Austin, Texas. He was an elder and his wife started its school. The church was nondenominational and very successful.

But Mike was uneasy; the congregation only celebrated communion once a month on Sunday evening. And he remembers that he was the only elder who wanted to do it. "I was like, I'd do Eucharistic prayer, yay!" Mike says. That realization led to a period of transition.

Mike sought advice from the Rector of St. Matthew's in Austin who asked if he had ever taken his wife to an Episcopal service. He hadn't and said, "Well no, we might want to try that." So they went to St. David's in downtown Austin to its "groovy little hippie folk mass" on Mother's Day. As it happened, the guest preacher was "a guy named Jeff Black who was coming to Austin to plant a church." He described it as "spirit-filled, sacramental, reaching young unchurched adults; small-group based." So Mike went up to him after the service and said, "You don't know me but I'm having a Kairos moment." This started Mike's clock as a postulant. Six months later he was a candidate, and six months after that Mike was ordained a deacon. "I couldn't have done it much quicker," he says.

After a year at Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest and with the support of Bishop Payne of the Diocese of Texas, Mike was ordained a deacon in 1999 and a priest in 2000. During seminary, Mike and Laurie were involved in Black's church plant, St. Barnabas. Although, Mike did spend a year as a deacon at St. Richard's in Round Rock in 1999. His curacy, however, was back at St. Barnabas. In a few years, that church plateaued between 160 and 200 members, defined itself as over against the direction of the national church, and refused to construct a building at a critical moment in its growth. Eventually, the congregation at St. Barnabas left the Episcopal Church and now affiliates with the Evangelical Covenant Church. "One of the negative lessons I learned," Mike concludes, "is that you can't plant a church around discontent."

So Mike's experience with two church plants—one evangelical and black and another Episcopal and innovative—made him a logical choice: first, as Vicar in a struggling ethnic church, and 18 months later, as a church planter in the growing Dallas suburb of McKinney. Although Mike was initially assigned to St. Phillip's, a growing congregation west of McKinney in Frisco, he didn't stay very long. Mike notes that St. Phillip's was in a building campaign at the time, and he felt more like pitching in to help rather than pushing for attention on behalf of a new church. In the end, only two couples were recruited from St. Phillip's for the new church plant. The rest were gathered solely through Mike's and Laurie's tireless groundwork in their new home of McKinney, Texas.

According to the current Senior Warden, "McKinney is vibrant; it's growing." The U.S. Census data bears this out. In 2000, there were a little over 10,000 people living in a two-mile radius around St. Andrew's current location; by 2010 that number nearly quadrupled. By 2016, the total population around St. Andrew's is projected to be more than 56,000. The average age of the population in 2000 was about 29 and in 2010 about 31. By 2016, the average age will be about 33. It's a young community, predominantly made up of families and their children. There also is a smaller but growing percentage of empty nesters and middle-aged singles, couples and retirees — including some retired grandparents of the younger families. Plus it's affluent; the average household income in 2011 was over \$100,000.

For now, the emphasis is on families and children. In any direction from St. Andrew's parking lot, one can see the rolling rooftops of multi-story, single-family dwellings, barely twenty feet from each other

---

on three sides, with small, well-landscaped front yards, and separated by thousands of miles of privacy fencing. The suburbs are dotted with high-end malls offering products for children and pets, and also providing physical fitness opportunities for parents. Like these outlets, most local restaurants are part of regional or national chains. Schools, private and public, are everywhere. Safety, privacy, comfort and predictability reign.

What strikes one first is the mass, monotony, and anonymity of this swath of suburbia. As Randall Balmer observed, contemporary suburban architecture exchanged the convivial front porch of the nineteenth century with the enclosed backyard. Everything here is a link in an endless suburban chain of buildings, goods, and services: the stores, the restaurants, the houses, the schools. One block or development looks very much like another. A church, especially one that echoes allegiances and affiliations of one's childhood or one's grandparents, may become a substitute "front porch" where people of a variety of ages and stages of life can gather, get to know one another, and be mutually accountable. It's a natural multigenerational gathering place in the midst of domiciles that serve mostly to separate and disperse — such as to work, usually a fair drive away — not to congregate.

According to Victoria Heard, the Canon for New Church Development at the Diocese of Dallas, what Mike did was "pretty classic suburban-smart church planting." This approach includes both evangelism and what she calls "corporate mercies." Meaning, "some way where you do something concrete that makes a difference in the community." The Michie's did it all. They got access to the largest development in the area's newcomer survey, which includes religious affiliation, recorded the names of all Episcopal families, cross-listed and "scratched off" any on St. Peter's roll (the only other and oldest parish in McKinney), and then personally contacted everyone else. Mike says, "We collected a couple of families that way."

Mike is described as a "connector." Diocesan officials say he "did a brilliant job of connecting to the city of McKinney." Right away, the Michie's erected a sign on the church's future site that listed its website and the location of its services, which first met in the aerobics room of the local Y. Talking about this stage in formation of the new congregation, Mike says he "got lit up by that whole conspiracy of kindness stuff, where [I asked] what can we do in our mission field to be kind?"

"He did a lot of 'taste and see' events," said Canon Heard. They held a free picnic with hotdogs, snowcones, and a bounce house at a local park. They put door hangers on every house in the neighborhood inviting residents to services and events. When gas prices increased drastically after Hurricane Katrina, Mike worked out a deal with a local gas station to donate a dime from every gallon of gas sold to the Red Cross. On St. Francis Day (and with images of lost Katrina pets still haunting the television news) Mike and his launch team held a blessing of the animals at PetSmart and took free pictures of people and their pets. At the town's Dickens' Christmas celebration, he extended that same idea and put up a photo booth offering free family portraits. "We'd pose them, take their picture, burn it on a CD for them, and we're having a conversation with them the whole time, telling them about the church." Mike

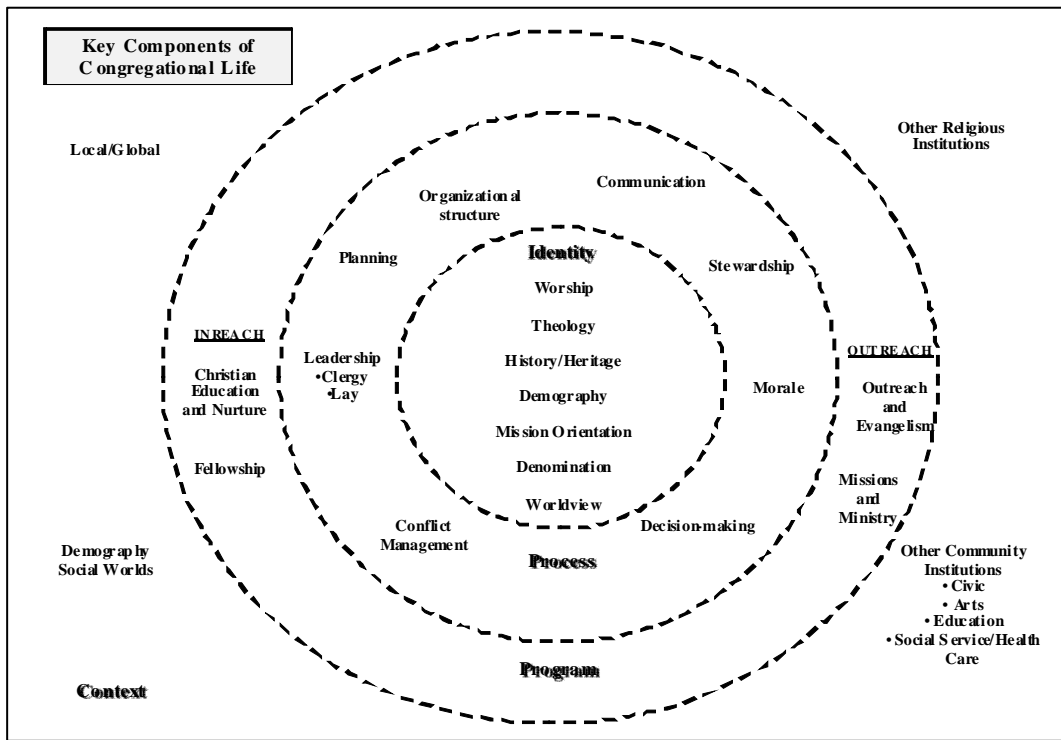
recalls. Invariably, they'd ask, "Who are you guys? Why are you doing this? Do we owe you anything? No, it's free," he said.

Mike also partnered with other McKinney churches to create a furniture bank. Lay leadership at St. Andrew's also started an annual "Believe" run to support a local Hispanic preschool. "So that stuff got into our DNA," Mike said. "The outreach stuff."

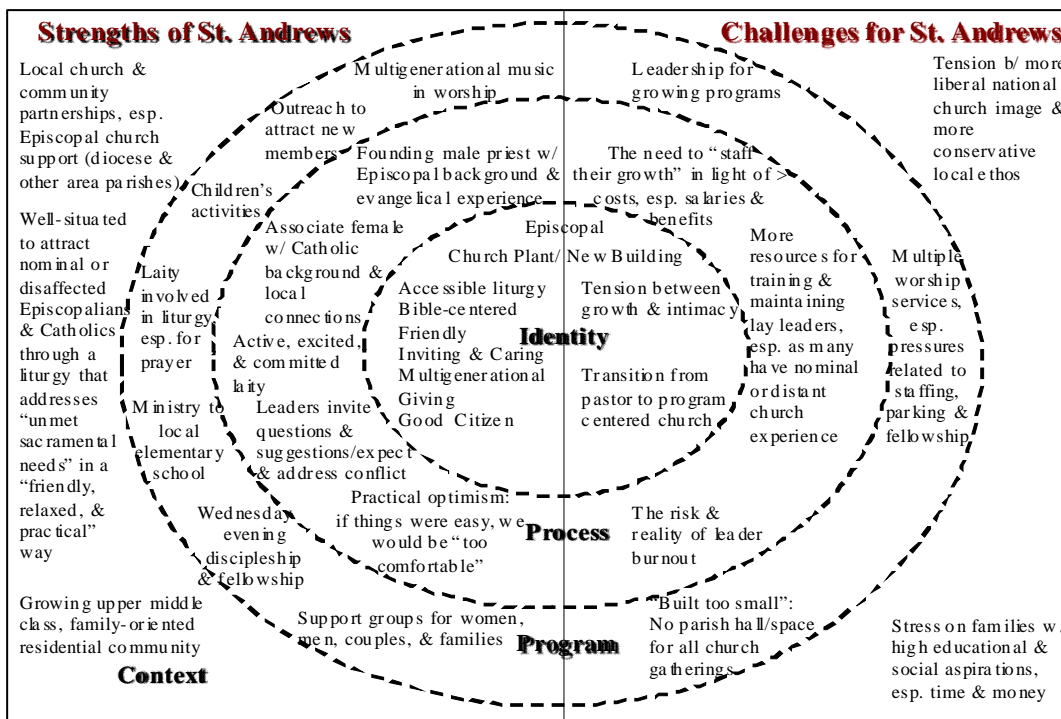
After their first three months in McKinney, the Michie's gathered a team of about 12 families and met in the bonus room of one of the member's homes. By February 2006, plans for the church were formulated and the name "St. Andrew's" was approved by Bishop Stanton. Mike started worship services that very month in the aerobics studio at the Y, which it quickly outgrew even before the official launch of the church. Mike believes that one piece of bad advice from church planting consultants is "Wait to have church." He says that is a big mistake, especially for Episcopal churches. "We're sacramental people," he declared. "People need to see their priest, their leader preside at the Eucharist. It's the most community-building thing we do." According to Mike, "One of the keys to our success in the prelaunch period from February to November of '06 when we [publically] launched was having that weekly gathering time."

By the November 5th, 2006, public service, the fledgling congregation had grown from a small team to a prelaunch critical mass of about 70 and moved to the largest space at the McKinney YMCA: its gymnasium. Right before the inaugural service, the congregation did a direct mailing to the closest 10,000 households announcing the launch and a sermon series around "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe." That Sunday, 152 people attended the service, including visitors and well-wishers from the Diocese. By the end of the first year, St. Andrew's went from "0 to 120" in average Sunday attendance, Mike says. Over the next four years, the church steadily organized, adding a part-time Music Ministry Director and a full-time Associate Vicar, as well as requisite lay leadership for the liturgy, church administration, and program development—especially Christian education. With the help of wise and skilled laity, St. Andrew's commissioned a feasibility study and ran a successful capital campaign that netted close to a million dollars for construction of a permanent building. By 2011, worship attendance averaged close to 200, and since the consecration of its 9,500 square foot facility in January 2012, attendance has doubled—as have the number of services.

The story of St. Andrew's provides significant clues to its current identity, process, program and context (see "Key Components of Congregational Life" below). These dynamic qualities reflect the ways that a congregation's purpose, structure, accountability, and action link its understanding of God to its internal life and its relationship to the larger community. Faithful and healthy congregations are clear about who (and Whose) they are, and that clarity shapes how they staff, support, and organize that vision, which leads to effective inreach and outreach work that has a positive impact on (even transforms) the community at large. And in a healthy (and growing) congregation, the dynamic also works the other way around: as a community grows and changes, the congregation is open enough to respond with refreshed programs that are supported by correlative processes and translated into a renewed vision.



Even at this early stage, St. Andrew's has a great number of foundational strengths. As a dynamic organization, it also realizes (and faces) significant challenges (see St. Andrew's Strengths and Challenges below). Its strengths have produced rapid growth. Its challenges are in part the outcome of that growth and in part a product of environmental forces that all congregations grapple with in order to survive, or, as in the case of St. Andrew's, thrive.



---

## **A Recipe for Congregational Growth: 7 Key Ingredients**

The lessons for growth at St. Andrew's center on seven elements: its liturgy (and its clergy); its Bible-centered approach to worship and Christian formation; its warmth and friendliness (in an otherwise anonymous suburban context); its intentional and active "inviting" culture that goes beyond words to deeds; its multigenerational and close fellowship; its eagerness to teach and learn, especially about generosity; and its commitment to and excitement about a way forward despite obstacles. The last characteristic is its "edge": a practical optimism that turns overcoming "bumps in the road" into positive momentum.

### **Start With Accessible Liturgy (and Liturgists)**

Everyone agrees that St. Andrew's attracts people primarily through its worship. It is also the place where most new members first get involved in the life of the congregation. They are greeters in the Narthex; they sing in the choir; they play an instrument; they are ushers; they read Scripture; they are Chalice bearers; their kids are acolytes; and they are stationed around the perimeter of the sanctuary for prayer during the Eucharist. Even the children participate in worship, since they are with their parents up until a children's sermon at which time they are dismissed to Children's Church, and then return for the Eucharist. Moving to two services in 2012 only increased the demand and thus the involvement.

An emphasis on liturgy, the lectionary, and an inspiring, informative, and accessible homily are important to "Father Mike" and his Associate of three years, "Mother Mary" (Lessmann). Laity also point to the importance of good preaching to St. Andrew's. Several new members recall that they first found St. Andrew's on the Internet and were drawn to the congregation by Mike's online sermons. One young mother said, "I mean he is able to get the message across no matter what. It's almost in layman's terms... You feel like the word was for you; I still feel that way." And a longtime vestry member adds that Mary is a "wonderful preacher" and really challenges the way she thinks about and understands the Bible.

Mike says that the secret to effective homilies is two-fold; first is a commitment to preach the gospel, and second is to do it in a conversational way. A new member who is a regional manager of Frito-Lay says, "I know with the way the Episcopal calendar is broken out, every church basically does something [from] the same Scripture verses every Sunday. But there was one point, one month where for four Sundays [Father Mike] relates it to a different Disney movie. So, he's still scriptural but the Lion King? Finding Nemo?" This young father smiles, shakes his head, and sighs with apparent amazement. New members and older lay leaders alike express appreciation for the fact that Father Mike "never uses notes" and doesn't "preach [at] me." Another new member explains, "First and foremost, I wanted to hear the word of God. I didn't want it being preached to me. [And] what I found here [is] that [the Word] is being told as a story that I could open up to. I wasn't being read to."



Another valued feature of worship at St. Andrew's is the children's sermon, which Father Mike gives each Sunday. It's for preschoolers through fifth graders and occurs right after the Collect. Father Mike invites the children to "join me on my step," and they do, scattered in a loose semi-circle around him with their backs to the rest of the congregation. Most of these sermons feature Father Mike, his family's dog, Dolly, and the people they meet on their daily walks.

The ten-year-old daughter of a member couple describes Father Mike's conversations with the children: "Well, he's got these characters, there's Grumpy Frumpy, Happy Lappy, Pouty Frouty, and they are people who live in his neighborhood that face these different problems. He tells them how God and Jesus will help you through it."

On the Sunday I visited in mid-May, Father Mike and Dolly meet "Pouty" who is complaining about not getting a better prize at his school's annual Awards Day. Father Mike asks him what he believes God thinks of him. Pouty says "I don't know," but Father Mike assures him that he is very special to God. Then Mike asks all the children to look at the patterns of their thumbprints (which they do) and he tells them that each one is different from anyone else's. "It is a sign of your uniqueness," he says, "and a way to remember that each of us is created by God in a special way."

Later after the children are ushered off to Children's Church, Mother Mary extends the day's scripture about Matthias (the apostle elected after Judas's betrayal and death) in a homily that begins with a story about her alternate status in girl's junior league kickball and ends with a lesson about God's use of us in spite of what appears as our inadequacies or missteps. Matthias was a late choice, following a very unfortunate one, and his turn as a disciple, she says, was mostly the "luck of the draw." (In fact, the disciples drew lots to decide.) Was he the right choice? Mary says that it didn't really matter because as Pentecost approached, all of the disciples were drawn into a better plan. So, what does this mean for us today? Like the early disciples, she concludes, our responsibility is to reflect on Scripture, pray, submit to each other in community, and go forward. Whether we get it right or wrong, it doesn't matter.

Another way that worship, especially the liturgy, is made accessible is through its delivery. Mary notes that St. Andrew's is distinctive because it is "intentional about always looking at the worship service with the eyes of a visitor or newcomer... What you want is to make the services as approachable as possible." She lists four things that help: putting the liturgy in the bulletin so that people don't have to "balance four books in order to participate in worship"; mixing up musical styles and avoiding "dirges" in a minor key; prioritizing children's visibility in worship; and leading worship with warmth and joy. A vestry member comments, "Father Mike is a person you engage and talk to. Mother Mary, she smiles and the whole room does." Another member agrees, "They are very accessible." According to others, Mike and Mary are "People you can talk to that live the life you live," "And radiate love."

The importance of liturgy and the approachability of the liturgists at St. Andrew's are in part a function of both context and biography. Mike originally imagined that this suburban church plant with a sacramental core and a fresh, friendly, and laid-back approach would be attractive to unchurched young adults. What he found, instead, was that most people who are attracted to St. Andrew's have some

connection to the Episcopal Church in their backgrounds. They are nominal, distant, or disaffected Episcopalians (or someone in their family is or was); or they were or are more active in another church, moved to the area, and St. Andrew's is nearby. Or, like Mother Mary herself, they were or are Roman Catholics, and a smaller, friendly Episcopal congregation with a sacramental emphasis is very attractive.

Of course, the largest congregations in the area are evangelical (nondenominational or Southern Baptist) and the overall political ethos in the community is conservative. Mike allows that this is a challenge for St. Andrew's. But it's also an opportunity that Mike is especially well-equipped to tackle given his own evangelical experience. Still, national media attention that highlights Episcopal Church tensions over hot-button social issues sometimes filters impressions of prospective visitors and new members alike. In this regard, the fact that most members haven't been active Episcopalians for very long is both a blessing (they don't feel very connected to national church struggles) and a curse (they misunderstand or overreact to news about such tensions). Finally, as one lay leader observes, the fact that St. Andrew's is only one of three Episcopal congregations in the area means there is greater need and less competition for the kind of liturgy and fellowship that it offers.

Currently, there are two services out of necessity more than choice. The basic structure of both services is the same, although the earlier service is billed as the "Praise and Worship" one. In reality, both are blended in style with the first service featuring a few more praise choruses, while the second includes a few more hymns. At Easter this year, a third service was added and all three were filled. Multiple services, of course, require double-duty from clergy and additional volunteers. Nevertheless, St. Andrew's remains committed to worship and Christian education for children in the context of liturgy. Because of this, vestry members say, there is already planning underway for a second capital campaign and a larger, permanent sanctuary.

### **Take a Bible-Centered Approach**

St. Andrew's is serious about the Scriptures. New members and older ones alike talk about the Word or the Bible as central. And as already described, the homilies (referred to as sermons) are focused on the story and message of Scripture. One new member says, "I love the fact that the sermons are based on Scripture! It's not about the world." The focal lectionary passage each Sunday is "preached" in both the children's sermon and in the homily. The liturgist of the day—whether Father Mike or Mother Mary—also composes follow-up questions that are used for discussion in a Bible study on Thursday mornings.

A new member who is a longtime Episcopalian from Antigua says that she has learned more about the Bible in the short time she has been at St. Andrew's than ever before. She is even reading through the Book of Common Prayer at work. Another new member who is a stylist and a young mother says that St. Andrew's brings "the Bible and the people in the Bible" to the "here and now." But reading the Bible isn't always easy. She adds, "But the thing is... I go through the Bible, and I try to read it. And there's times where I'm looking at it, going, oh, my gosh, where's Mother Mary or Father Mike? How can they explain this to me? I'd understand it better if they were here."



---

Children's Church is also Bible-centered; I attended the Children's Church session for second through fifth grades. Mike's wife, Laurie, has a Master's degree in School Administration and coordinates the children's activities at St. Andrew's. The curriculum is Group, which is an evangelical publication. The session was very interactive and included a lot of Scripture passages—all of which the teachers (a lay woman and man) helped the children look up and read out loud. The lesson for the day was not connected to the lectionary passage, however. Another Bible-focused activity important to St. Andrew's is its annual Vacation Bible School that attracts close to 100 children from around the community.

### **Add a Large Measure of Friendliness**

The new members I talked with were unanimous in their appraisal of St. Andrew's friendliness that starts with the clergy and extends to the laity. One new member, a middle-aged nurse with a Catholic and Episcopal background and whose husband was recently diagnosed with cancer, talked about their two-month journey at St. Andrew's. "It's just been wonderful, I mean Mother Mary and Father Mike have just been wonderful. You feel a love of love in this church; there's a good spirit here." Even her Baptist-raised husband feels comfortable at St. Andrew's, she says. A young mother explains, "I think you feel welcomed... I think in some other churches people look at you and are kind of like, 'What are you doing here?' and check you out. [But] from the moment we came [here]—and this was a year and a half ago—we felt that people honestly wanted to see us come back. And when we came back, they said, 'Oh, my gosh, we're so glad you're back!' That was like a breath of fresh air. I know [that] even [in] the churches I grew up in, they wouldn't have done that. It's just a different feeling." And it helps, she adds, that "people look happy" on the website.

The need for community to counter suburban anonymity is strong. Particularly clear examples are the organically forming fellowship groups at St. Andrew's. There are monthly self-organized groups for men, women, couples, and families. Out of those affinity groups, another fellowship-oriented opportunity grew: KISS (Keep It Simple Suppers). KISS is an informal network of church-based dinner clubs. All the groups are open—meaning people come and go as they have time and interest—and all of them meet in different member homes.

Father Mike points to the liturgy, especially sermons, as the first factor in sustaining growth at St. Andrew's. But the second factor, he says, "is the natural friendliness and engagement in the church." "That is something," Mike continues, "we put in the DNA early. It stuck. We are nice to people when they walk through the door... People are looking for that, get it." The addition of Mother Mary reinforced the importance of relationships, especially friendships, at St. Andrew's. Several laity commented that Mary and her husband, Russ, have lived in McKinney for 20 years and that a number of families joined St. Andrew's specifically because of their involvement. "She brought a following," a vestry member says.

---

### **Invite and Care for Others Vigorously**

Intentional invitation and consistent, caring follow up are other factors that explain St. Andrew's growth. "Even today," Father Mike says, "anyone who wants to be a member of our church or has visited twice gets a phone call or an email from me directly saying, 'Hey, would you like to get together? Any questions about the church?'... I've been in the living rooms of 85 percent of members of our church."

Suburban anonymity combined with increased social and economic pressures and inevitable lifecycle stresses translates into fragile families. Invitations to join often turn into opportunities for pastoral care. About half of the new members I talked with at St. Andrew's were drawn to the church at a critical juncture in their lives. One woman's husband was newly diagnosed with cancer; a couple's marriage was coming apart; and another woman's husband was killed in a motorcycle accident. "I was coming home from Wal-Mart or something, and I just felt compelled to come here and when I did, this back door was open—and Mother Mary says normally that door is locked but it was unlocked that day—so we sat in the sanctuary and visited, Mother Mary and I," one remembers. Another recalls, "I got to be a part of the [women's fellowship] right away and again, I'm really closed about my husband and all that, so I didn't talk to anybody about [his death] for a long time, and it was okay... I was probably here for three or four months and then I felt like I needed to talk to somebody. So [Mother Mary and I] had a session, and it was a good session." And a young couple tearfully explains, "[We] wouldn't be married if it wasn't for St. Andrew's. We had hit a really bad spot, and we came here with faith and said, 'God, if you want us to be together, this is going to happen.' This place has totally changed us."

Intentional invitations and a warm welcome are a start but at St. Andrew's, they are only a start. What matters most is what happens next. At the end of a focus group with the vestry, one member asked if there was time to tell "one, really quick little story because this one's personal to me, but I know it happens every Sunday with a lot of people.., one day, it just so happened [that] my family didn't come so I was sitting alone. A lady wandered in, [Sally], she was crying during the service; she was needing help. She happened to sit down next to me and that week I happened to be alone because normally I'd be engaged with my family. They do anniversary and birthday blessings [as a regular part of the service]; she leaned over and said, 'Today's my birthday.' We got her with the folks in the prayer group in the back, and we held hands during the Lord's Prayer. She's been here every single Sunday since."

### **Results Will Be Multigenerational and "Sticky"**

Nearly everyone talks with appreciation about the multigenerational nature of St. Andrew's. Indeed, almost every activity hosted by the congregation is intentionally intergenerational. The best example, of course, is worship, and at either service there is a good mix of older couples, singles (of all ages), and families (including several three-generation ones). Wednesday evening fellowship dinners are also a multigenerational highlight (and their expected cessation for the summer is vocally bemoaned). Even ongoing outreach activities like the family photo booth at McKinney's Christmas festival or the Believe run for charity are draws for folks of all ages and stages of life.

One longtime lay leader talks about the amazing cohesiveness of St. Andrew's. The familial closeness (or relational "stickiness") that people want and find at the church is reinforced by its multigenerational character. It was hard earned though, through what Mother Mary calls "sweat equity." Before the current building was completed, the new congregation spent a lot of time "tabernacling." Not having a place to call their own (or to store the things that are necessary for worship and Christian education), every Sunday, clergy and laity literally constructed and deconstructed their sacred space. Vestry members talk about the friendship and commitment generated in the process. They also concede that the effort was beginning to wear a bit thin and that having a permanent building has been absolutely essential for further growth. Moreover, their deep care for each other is illustrated by voiced concern about burnout, which is why some lay people have been given sabbaticals from participation and leadership is seriously pursuing the addition of a part-time Youth Director.

### **Cover with Discipleship (Sprinkle a Pinch of Mary) and Generosity Will Rise**

Perhaps it is because so many of St. Andrew's members have been distant from the church (or are new to the Episcopal version) and because they are well-educated themselves and value it for their children, that there is a real appreciation for the kind of Christian formation offered at St. Andrew's. A middle-aged newer member with a Roman Catholic and an Anglican background says, "They're educating you. We're thirsty for knowledge; we want to know."

As described, the liturgy, homilies, and Children's Church—all a part of every worship service—are focused on "preaching the gospel" (in Mike's words). As the congregation grew, a discipleship hour before worship was first added when they were meeting in the gymnasium (and for a short time with less happy consequences in terms of flexibility of rules and space, in a local elementary school). One of Mother Mary's primary areas of responsibility is adult formation, although both she and Mike teach the two regular offerings during the discipleship hour on Wednesday night. Currently, Mother Mary is using Eugene Peterson's *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* to discuss the Psalms of Ascent to look at aspects of discipleship, and Father Mike is leading a kind of new member class entitled, "Discussing Your Questions about Our Church/Faith." One vestry member especially appreciates Mike's approach. "If you've got questions, come ask us. We look forward to it." He grins and says playfully, "So I started thinking up the most wild things I could think of!" But Mary knows that as St. Andrew's grows and matures, "We're starting to step into this space where some groups are going to be doing deeper, more intense work."

Integral to discipleship at St. Andrew's is outreach activities, especially those that are focused on helping others in need. Here, Father Mike's orienting philosophy is crucial. "The idea is you help people give. It's a ministry to the giver, not to the recipient," he explains. He credits the idea to "some folks at Holy Trinity, Brompton," in London as a part of their *Alpha* course. "It's a very powerful, subtle but powerful difference in approach to outreach. That's what we are adopting here. We want to help people give." They started by getting connected with social workers in the local Committee on Aging, the local school district, and the battered women's shelter. "It's very easy," Father Mike concludes. "You just call these people and say if you ever need anything, just call up. So, they call up, we go over, do an assessment of the people's house with a social worker. 'This is what you need—hey, I see you need a fridge or a

---

kitchen table.' When we did it—imagine taking your membership in there to these places with these social workers. It's like a veil is lifted and they're like "Wow!" Everybody at St. Andrew's knows. First of all, because I talk about it but [also] because members have experienced it [and] everyone in our church knows that two minutes from where we're sitting, a child doesn't have enough food to eat tonight. It's so great that we get that. So, finding the need is not the problem. It's really organizing the response to it."

A focus on teaching, modeling, and experiencing giving as a core responsibility of Christian discipleship turns an older, more paternalistic, paradigm on its head. That this approach is working here is evidenced in one new member's conversation about stewardship. When asked about St. Andrew's future challenges, a manager at Sprint says, "I think financial. This was financial, getting here was. They're going to have to step it up all the time. To do that and still not be pushy is really hard, too." When asked if she felt pressured in any way for giving, she said, "No. It's funny that there are times when I feel, I don't know if it's the Spirit or whatever, I feel the need to give. It's not like they've said anything to me. I send them an email going, 'This is what I thought I might do,' and they'll say 'That's a great idea,' and 'We can do it that way.' Or I'll send them an email. 'Where would you want me to give X amount of dollars?' So, I give them that option but never have I felt like I needed to give more.

A vestry member says, "One thing I wanted to say about the church [is] that people are willing to give. The facility here speaks volumes because when we did a capital campaign we expected to give X amount and we got about double that... I know that there are situations where they have to call parishioners and say, "Hey, can you donate some money?" and they do it. I know somebody in this room who made a nice donation to help the church buy some stuff. It's been really healthy as far as that — people willing to give to the church."

The wife of a founding couple in their sixties says, "I believe that our people give. They may not be tithers but they're giving the very most they can."

Of course, this approach to giving is about more than money. Father Mike talks about the Believe charity run that was originally started by St. Andrew's, but has grown so large that the local Rotary Club sponsors it. Now, he explains, the church is "really focused" on Burks elementary, an adopted Title IX school in their area. The church developed a working relationship with a guidance counselor and a social worker at the school. And if a child ever needs anything such as medicine, mattresses, or clothing, Mike says, "They let us know and we get them." Money for medicines comes from St. Andrew's "Matthew's Fund," a red box on the altar where worshippers celebrating anniversaries or birthdays make donations. And every week during the school year, Father Mike adds, "We do a Friday backpack thing with the food bank where members of our church go and fill a backpack with food for the kids to take home over the weekend." In the Narthex the Sunday I visited, there were also sign-up sheets for a program the church is going to help with to provide food over the summer. "It's a neat relationship because it's helped us focus in on solving some poverty-driven problems in a targeted group that we can actually change," Father Mike observes.

Mother Mary coordinates ongoing outreach efforts and hopes that "someone will rise up from the congregation who would be our point person for our relationship with Burks and our outwardly-focused ministries (that also include an annual mission trip to Honduras) and that just has not happened." But she is not really worried. "I know at some point we'll recognize who that person is and they'll be given to us, but it's not there."

### **Turn Up the Heat and Prepare a Container**

If heat is energy and energy is necessary to the body to thrive, then St. Andrew's is an especially healthy part of the Body of Christ. A growing congregation requires direction to minister effectively — in a word, administration. The current administrative effectiveness at St. Andrew's is a direct result of the energy, commitment, and wisdom of its clergy and lay leadership. From Father Mike, there are convictions about being positive, laidback, and practical, with a gift for thinking outside the box. From Mother Mary, there are penchants for order (from her accounting background), pastoral empathy and an understanding of systems theory. The result is a practical optimism that permeates an increasingly interdependent, learning-oriented organization.

The way that St. Andrew's approaches the change and conflict that are inevitable in a growing congregation is especially instructive. A conversation about the journey to a permanent building goes like this:

*Senior Warden:* "We got with one builder and his construction people and started picking out everything, then that fell through. Went to another place that was already built; we were going to lease it for 5 years and that fell through. So we said, 'Let's look into building,'" and the economy was very bad. We don't have any rich sugar daddies in our church; they're all worker bees, at least to my knowledge. So, we decided to explore building a building to see if we could do it. We hired a firm [and] did a feasibility study that came back positive. Then decided to take a shot at it, and the [initial campaign] projections [were] \$4-500,000 dollars; we ended up with pledges at \$950,000 dollars. So we greatly exceeded our expectations, which in my mind without a doubt is where God wanted us to go... *There's a point where I think you need to make a decision to get permanent quarters; there's a church east of us [that didn't do this] that no longer exists.*" [Emphasis is mine.]

*Original vestry member:* "To get on the ground, to have permanent quarters, your expectations may have to be adjusted according to your finances. This is not what we originally designed with our architect. We wound up with around 10,000 square feet and we started out with a plan for around 14,000. We just couldn't get there. So I would say to a young church, 'Adjust your expectations on what you get on the ground and [be willing to] live with a little less if you have to for a while.' Because the minute we opened our doors, we increased attendance by 100 people over our average attendance at the Y. And I mean, immediately!"

*Junior Warden:* "Yeah, talking about bumps in the road, that was certainly one of them. Not so much that we didn't feel we could pay for [a larger space]... at that point it was the economy

---

and the banks were very stringent [about] what they were going to loan out. That was part of it. You had to readjust and take on what they'd allow us [to].

As far as the building process goes, we learned a few things that we wouldn't do that way [again] in the next couple of phases. But you're going to get that probably in most any kind of building campaign. [Going forward] I think our general dream for St. Andrew's is once we build our permanent sanctuary, we'd like to really focus on building a school... I know Father Mike is also very passionate right now about having an outreach community center."

*Current vestry member:* "I think it's really important that we're energized for that next phase already. It's not like we got here and said, 'Gosh, thank goodness we're done.'"

*Senior Warden:* "We'll probably get serious about [the next phase of building] in the next four-six months."

*Another vestry member:* "It's this dynamic energy to see the next plan. But there also seems to be a really good acceptance that we are going to change a lot now. We're going to get a different kind of congregant because we're in a building now. We can now kneel; our altar guild can get more settled; and there can be an influx of more traditional Episcopalian stuff without losing what has been fresh about our approach. There's this wonderful acceptance on the part of everyone that part of this we can plan for and part of it is going to be an organic adaptation as things change, which I think is a good way to go about it."

*Senior Warden:* "I think she [a vestry member] spoke to it there. We are a church that has traditional values but we don't focus on all of those things necessarily as far as service goes or how we go about the daily business. We look outside the box in all aspects of it, I think. We make some mistakes but we learn from them for sure."

The fact that lay leaders and new members alike expect (and even hope) that St. Andrew's will change is part and parcel of its dynamism and its positive momentum. When I ask about the congregation's future dreams, one new member says, "That it stays fresh and vibrant. That [there] wouldn't be the same thing going on in ten years as [there] is now because they stay updated. They know what's going on in the community. I think that's it. They understand that people change, generations change."

But adjustment to new people and circumstances is not always smooth. Laurie, the Children's Ministry Director observes, "Churches are full of people." As a consequence of St. Andrew's warmth and health, she explains, "If there's somebody having problems, we know about it." And usually, when that happens, "Mary and Mike meet with them—and now, that's not to say that it never happens—but, most generally, they get [the] attention they need outside of the whole. So it's kind of private." And because of this, "I think people feel cared for."

When there is a difference of opinion or dissatisfaction and a member decides to leave, "Mike is very careful to try to celebrate people. Even if we know they're leaving under what we know as duress,"



---

Laurie continues, "[Mike] would pull them up and say, 'Yes, but look at the service you've given us,' and honor them in that way so [that] the congregation sees we're celebrating [their] ministry with us." Mother Mary interjects, "And even that provides a kind of closure on the relationship so that people don't just generally disappear and have raw feelings."

However, the ways that decisions are made and conflict is handled are changing. Mother Mary says, "I think when you talk about church plants it is a different environment than an established institution. So the clergy leader, the planter, is going to make a lot of the decisions. Early on, you don't need to have a whole lot of discussions and meetings about things. Things are just happening. So, I think what we're transitioning into now [is] relying more on lay leadership, having more collegiality in decision making. I will say that my instinct is that in this group folks want to make sure there is a consensus. There is not, yet, at least here, what I've seen in some other congregations—which is the little parking lot meetings. Where you leave a meeting and there are three people in the parking lot continuing to discuss their angle. We generally don't have that here.

"There's a really good relationship of trust among the leadership. And again, I think... it's a great example from Mike [on] down that *we treat one another with respect; we put things on the table; we don't go around and behind things.*" [Emphasis is mine.]

Perhaps what is most instructive is the way lay leaders interpret challenge and change. Such bumps in the road require St. Andrew's "not to be real comfortable" and also "keep us driven to what comes next," a vestry member observes. As Mother Mary suggests in her homily on the Sunday after Ascension Day, this lesson is an ancient one. "God does what we can never imagine. Whether Matthias was good or bad or the disciples' choice was right or wrong, they were drawn into a better plan. Like the early disciples," she urges, "Our responsibilities are to reflect on Scripture, pray, submit to each other in community, and go forward."