

Renewal and Revival at St. John's, Roanoke, Virginia

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The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society

St. John's Episcopal Church is a historic parish, located in downtown Roanoke, Virginia, a few city blocks from the true central business district. It is quite visible, but not really an imposing presence overlooking a busy intersection. The building is stone with a slate roof, and appears to be a large, Early English-style parish or minster, more old country than new, with a large square Norman tower and a very wide and tall nave. Inside, however, the church is pure Victorian Gothic with soaring wooden arches, magnificent paneled ceilings and a tiled floor. The current church building was completed in 1892, soon after the railroad arrived in Roanoke and the population soared in what was once Big Lick, Virginia.

St. John's was always the largest Episcopal parish in Roanoke and is currently the largest parish in the Episcopal Diocese of Southwestern Virginia. During the last 23 years the membership of St. John's always exceeded 1,200 and average Sunday worship attendance ranged between 304 and 531. This parish is much larger than the norm among Episcopal churches nationally and it never declined to the point that closing seemed inevitable or likely—unlike so many other downtown parishes with large facilities.

The largest attendance in the recent history of St. John's occurred in the mid- to late-1990s, when average Sunday attendance exceeded 500 for several years. This high mark was during the tenure of Thomas O'Dell, who was rector from 1992 to 1999, a period that included the construction of a large new parish hall and educational/office wing. Attendance dipped somewhat in O'Dell's last year, however, and fell again to 357 during the two+ year interim that followed. When a new rector was called in 2002 attendance rebounded to 397. Unfortunately, this progress did not continue. Attendance dropped in 2003 to 356 and reached a new low of 304 the year after the rector was encouraged to resign. What happened is a familiar story. A strong congregation became embroiled in conflict. The conflict festered and members left and were not replaced.

The source of the conflict was not a scandal. Rather, the church was caught up in a wider denominational conflict over the consecration of an openly gay bishop in 2003. But the story is not that of a congregation divided over theology and ethics. The conflict was due primarily to the actions of the rector after General Convention 2003 and the reaction of the congregation to those actions. In the collective mythology of the members, the conflict was bookended by two sermons: the first referred to as, "My way or the highway," and the second, on his last Sunday, remembered as, "Take this job and shove it."

A two-year interim followed the rector's departure, along with significant healing, and then a new rector was called: Barkley Thompson. Growth began immediately after Barkley arrived and has continued unabated, with the congregation increasing in attendance from 317 to 510 during the last five years. Membership rose from 1,297 to 1,641 and operating income increased by 45%. The story of this

congregational turnaround is not just about its new rector, but rather of the rector, strong lay leadership, a welcoming congregation and the willingness to change. St. John's was never a "basket case" congregation, but it could have become one. Instead, it shrugged off its difficulties and moved forward, starting a new capital campaign while an interim was its priest, and then calling a new rector who was anything but a safe choice.

In February 2013 Barkley Thompson left St. John's to become Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Houston, Texas. But he left behind a very strong congregation.

Moving Past the Not-So-Distant Past

Prior to the conflict that began in 2003, St. John's could be described as a solid, traditional downtown Episcopal church in a city where being downtown did not automatically lead to decline. It was as large, or larger, than any other mainline church in downtown Roanoke and had a substantial presence in the community. It also had the reputation of being a rather affluent church where many prominent residents attended. Downtown Roanoke is quite accessible to the suburbs—particularly on Sunday—so driving to church from outlying areas is not as difficult as it is in many other cities.

In the Episcopal way, the affluent church also had a sizable number of outreach ministries that made it seem less insular than it would have ordinarily been. It had three Sunday morning worship services, including the obligatory early morning Rite I service, which included no music and very few people. At the two primary Sunday morning services the church was blessed by exceptional music led by the firm, but benevolent hand of David Charles. The maestro, as one staff member called him, is no prima donna, but rather an able choirmaster who described himself as a "dinosaur looking for a tar pit to fall into, because I love everything that's old and traditional." He helped build a choir that was professional, cohesive and surprisingly open to new members.

The church is blessed by a strong staff and able, committed leadership. And it has long been known for being a friendly, welcoming church.

As with most Episcopal churches in 2002 and the first half of 2003, the ordination of gay and lesbian priests was not a subject of great discussion or conflict. Conflict was unseemly and Episcopal churches had managed to avoid most of the problems that were suffered by sister mainline denominations over the past few decades. The exception was women's ordination years earlier, but that disruption and its resolution did not have serious negative consequences. A few dioceses still refused to ordain women decades after it became possible to do so, but it was thought by most church leaders that "they would eventually come around." The issue of ordaining homosexual priests was different. The church had many gay and lesbian priests and perhaps a few gay bishops, and their presence was tacitly accepted in the more progressive dioceses but ignored by others. Many gay priests were both in and out of the closet. Nearly everyone knew they were gay, but it was not a subject of great discussion. However, a few dioceses had come to accept openly gay priests, some of whom were in committed relationships. Such was the case in the Diocese of New Hampshire.

So when Gene Robinson was elected Bishop of the Diocese of New Hampshire and the timing was such that the approval of his election had to take place at General Convention, there was suddenly no way to ignore the issue of gay priests and gay bishops.

Due to the social status of the Episcopal Church in the United States, there also was no way to hide what was happening at General Convention. It was all over the news and the subject of discussion, praise, derision and even cruel jokes in private conversations among Episcopalians, Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics and others. The vast majority of Episcopal congregations experienced conflict over the issue. Those that did not were either progressive parishes for which the issue was not an issue or very conservative parishes in which nearly everyone was opposed. Most parishes handled the conflict fairly well. They lost some members and nationally these numbers added up. But some parishes did not handle the conflict very well. St. John's, Roanoke was one of the latter, and whereas it did not see its membership drop severely, it did lose several hundred members and experienced a drop in giving as people withheld funds or turned in "protest pledges" of \$1 or \$10 rather than the usual two or three thousand dollars.

Any church, even in a progressive denomination, will have members who hold more traditional beliefs and values. This is particularly true in the South and particularly true around the issue of sexuality. Conflict was coming to St. John's after General Convention in the summer of 2003. The question was whether the leadership of the congregation was going to try to pretend that it was irrelevant to St. John's, blame "the national church" as alien to the true Episcopal Church, or exacerbate it by deepening natural differences within the congregation. The rector of St. John's did the latter by preaching the "my way or the highway" homily. According to one staff member who was there at the time, "You don't come into a 125-year-old parish and tell these people that the Bible is a group of fantasies, and if you don't like where the church and the denomination are going, find yourself another church."

The leadership style of the rector at the time of the conflict was already proving somewhat problematic prior to 2003. He was called in February 2002 as the second choice of the search committee when another candidate dropped out. He came from a much smaller church and apparently had difficulty adjusting to life at St. John's. According to one long-term member who was on the search committee that called him, "He came here and was kind of bombarded with empowered laity . . . and I really think he saw a lot of us as threats rather than resources." Despite being called because he was perceived as warm and kind rather than intellectual and distant, as rector he was experienced as insular and unfriendly. In addition, some of the leaders of the congregation felt that he was not very hard working and spent money inappropriately: "He was lazy. People thought he came to work late, left early, spent money. He wasn't a minister. He'd walk by and didn't greet you."

Without the social and political capital that might have come from longer tenure and close relationships with members of the congregation, the rector preached the "my way or the highway" sermon a few weeks after General Convention. Apparently, the sermon was fairly conciliatory up until the end. It talked about the fact that the Episcopal Church had long been open to a range of beliefs and positions. But at the end, the rector suggested that if you did not agree with the direction of the Episcopal Church, *you could leave*. This was not received well, even among those who were inclined to support him: "I was sitting there in that pew saying my God, man," said one long-time member. So despite the fact that

many people were confused and hurting over the decision of General Convention, "The way he chose to weather the storm was not to have any compassion or tenderness to the people it bothered, It was just a take it or leave it attitude," according to one life-long member of St. John's.

Some people turned against the rector; some tried to help him; and some were offended by the way he was being treated. Others left when the conflict and tension became palpable.

The conflict simmered for almost two years. Lay leaders met with him. A second vestry meeting was held every month with a facilitator. Programs and groups were shut down because "the rector wanted to do everything or not have it done." The situation was described by all as very painful. The church was divided and it brought out the worst in people. Toward the end, the vestry election became highly politicized with active campaigning for the supporters of the rector—and suspicions that the choir was behind it all.

Eventually, the rector was forced out and all save one of his associates left soon after. An older, former pastor who had been hired to do pastoral care a few months earlier stayed to act as an unofficial interim before the real interim was hired. Interestingly, almost all of the administrative staff remained, along with the minister of music. They had been at St. John's before the current troubles, through them, and did not see the current situation as permanent. The one staff member who resigned was the rector's secretary, who chose to retire abruptly in 2003 after 30 years of service in the midst of the conflict. But she remained an active member of St. John's and is still one.

After a few months with the "interim interim," a real interim was called in 2005 and the atmosphere changed quickly. And it was a good thing. According to David Charles, "People would come to church and leave during the prelude because you could feel the tension."

Anne Hallmark was called as interim in 2005 and came to a place of broken relationships—particularly among the leadership of the congregation. Healing began with a vestry retreat at Sweet Briar College. Leaders were given permission to forgive and love, and before the weekend was over people were going up to each other and saying, "I might have been wrong." The healing that began among the leadership continued among the larger membership during the next two years. By 2006 attendance had stabilized and the church was no longer running a deficit.

St. John's was being restored to health in 2006, but an unforeseen disaster tested the congregation anew. But this time the outcome was determination rather than division. A bolt of lightning struck the church a few hours before the worship service that was scheduled on Good Friday, 2006, disabling the historic organ and damaging the nave. It would be nine months before the nave could be used again and years before the church had a working organ. So while worshipping in the parish hall, without a permanent rector and in the midst of a search, St. John's did what seems unthinkable: It embarked on a major capital campaign to restore the church. The campaign was successful and actually raised more than its goal. The nave and other facilities were fully restored in 2009 and work on the organ was completed in 2010.

New Leadership and Direction

After experiencing a failure of leadership, St. John's might have been expected to call someone who was "safe" as their next priest. But like the decision to embark on a capital campaign without a permanent rector, the congregation took another risk by calling a young, highly energetic priest who was certainly not a safe, passive leader. Barkley Thompson was called from Holy Apostles Episcopal Church, outside of Memphis—his first church out of seminary. He had helped Holy Apostles grow from a mission of 40 to more than 400 in a little over four years.. Although not actively seeking to leave, Barkley felt called to urban rather than suburban ministry and St. John's, Roanoke, was certainly not suburban. In September of 2007 at the age of 34 he became the new rector at St. John's.

St. John's was a friendly, welcoming church and had redeveloped a sense of community in the two interim years, but the membership was getting older and relatively few children were attending Sunday school. The interim had renewed pastoral care of existing members, but procedures for welcoming and incorporating new people were not really in place. Social outreach ministries had long been important in St. John's, but oversight and integration into the life of the church was not well organized.

Barkley brought new energy to the church and also a sense that the church could continue to move forward. He is not a charismatic leader, but he added life to worship through his enthusiasm and a conversational approach to preaching. With a greater sense that the troubles that had hurt the community were over, some people who left the church because the conflict was too much for them returned to active participation. Not only was the conflict resolved, but the church also had a direction. It was almost like a new church, in this case one that was trying to re-establish itself and move forward. Energy was focused on restoring the church, and now with a new priest, the congregation had even stronger leadership and a growing sense of unity.

All churches today and particularly those in urban areas face a dilemma regarding service times, traditional service formats, what to do about Christian education for children and adults, lack of regular community gatherings, and inefficient means for integrating people into the community. St. John's faced all of these issues. It had three services on Sunday morning. First was the 8:00 a.m. Rite I service that was attended primarily by a small group of older people, many of whom went to breakfast or coffee after the service and then went home. It was followed by Rite II services at 9:00 and 11:00 a.m. that were similar to each other and included music and a choir. Sunday school was held after the 9:00 service. St. John's did not make the mistake of holding Sunday school for children during a worship service, but the lack of meaningful options for younger adults during the Sunday school period hurt the attendance of families with children. The Sunday school and adult formation period also only lasted around 30 minutes, from 10:15 to 10:45. St. John's, like so many mainline churches, was increasingly attended by middle aged and older adults who already knew one another. It was a recipe for stagnation and decline, even in a church with a strong sense of community and committed lay leadership.

Members asked for an alternative worship experience, which might be a better fit for contemporary lifestyles, and that was more informal. Working with lay leaders and staff, Barkley developed what is called "the Gathering," which is held on Sunday evening, beginning at 5:00 p.m. Dress is much more casual, music is acoustic without a choir, and the service is shorter, lasting about 50 minutes rather than

the more typical 70-minute Episcopal liturgy. The priest is in slacks and a black shirt with clerical collar rather than vestments. It is not a “contemporary” worship service with praise hymns and PowerPoint, however. Called a Rite III service by the rector, it seems fairly traditional although it lacks the full range of typical elements that add length to most Episcopal services. The Eucharist is celebrated at the Gathering, as it is in the morning, and the homily is the same, but the ritual seems more accessible and less formal. But there are no electrified instruments. No electric guitar or bass. No electronic keyboard. Old hymns are not sung to the tunes of popular songs.

The liturgy could be called “Ancient Modern,” drawing from the Iona Community Worship Book, the Prayer Books of the Church of Ireland and New Zealand and our own Book of Common Prayer. Music includes an acoustic guitar, cello, flute and sometimes a mandolin or banjo. For a keyboard there is a melodica, a wind instrument that is also called a “key flute.” A variety of hymns are used, most with new arrangements and instrumentation. The overall effect is worshipful and somewhat contemplative, rather than slick, bouncy or “happy-clappy,” as is often the case in contemporary Christian worship or “blended” worship styles that some mainline churches have adopted.

The order of service does not change from week to week, although the scripture readings, music and “the meditation” (homily) do vary. All of the words needed for reading are in a single sheet worship bulletin. After opening music by the acoustical group with the singing of a hymn, the priest reads a collect that is printed in the bulletin. He then says, “The Lord’s Spirit is here,” and the people respond, “God’s Spirit is with us.” The priest says, “The Lord be with you,” and the people respond, “And also with you.” The priest reads a prayer, which is followed by a reading. At the service I attended, the first scripture reading was by a 13-year-old girl in a dark hoodie. After singing a non-traditional arrangement of “All Hail the Power,” the Gospel was read by a woman in her 30s, dressed in jeans.

The sermon from the morning, now called a meditation, was delivered by the somewhat casually dressed rector. Although preaching the same message, the delivery seemed to have been a bit livelier and got a more animated reaction from the congregation. People chuckled more at the parts that were meant to be amusing. The prayers of the people were offered with contemplative music playing and included thoughtful statements rather than the usual single-line prayers for Bishops, priests, the President, the Governor of Virginia, etc. The leader said, “Pray for the joy of human life, with all its wonder and surprises. Pray we would remember that all people are created in the very image of God.”

There was no recitation of the Nicene Creed. There was confession of sins and prayer for absolution, followed by the passing of the peace and the offering. The offering was taken as the people sang “God who saves.” The Lord’s Table was set at the same time.

Holy Communion followed. The priest said, “Be present, be present, Lord Jesus Christ our risen high priest. Make yourself known in the breaking of the bread.” The people responded, “Wise and gracious God, you spread a table before us; nourish your people with the work of life, and the bread of heaven.” The Eucharistic prayer was next, followed by the Lord’s Prayer and the taking of the elements. About 240 people were present, which was more than the usual number.

After Communion, the priest and people said together, "Strengthen for your service, Lord, these hands that holy things have taken; May these ears which have heard your Word be deaf to all clamor and dispute; May these tongues which have sung your praise be free from deceit; May these eyes which have seen the tokens of your love shine with the light of hope; And may these bodies which have been fed with your body be refreshed with the fullness of your life; Glory to you forever. Amen." The service ended with a blessing, a closing hymn and the people being sent out: "Let us go forth in the name of Christ." They responded, "Thanks be to God. Alleluia, alleluia."

The service had a unity to it and a flow that was easily followed. It had a familial quality with a sense of joy and spirituality. There was no going through the motions or stop-and-start activities. It was also quite brief for an Episcopal service.

Most of the growth experienced by St. John's in recent years has come through the Gathering. Yet it would be a mistake to attribute such growth simply to a change in worship style at a different time of day. Rather, the Gathering is at the center of a different approach to worship, education and community that may serve as a model for churches that strive to adapt to changing lifestyles and to deal with some of the problems inherent in the traditional Sunday morning approach. "We pray, we eat, we learn," said the Reverend Erin Hensley who serves as associate to the rector. And that is the pattern. First there is the Gathering service. A meal follows in the parish hall. People wander from the back of the nave through the wide Narthex, up a small set of steps, to the very large parish hall. Food is served buffet style and members and visitors eat together at round tables scattered around the room. There is an effort to serve healthy, nutritious food rather than the usual church cafeteria ham slices and chicken fingers.

There is great energy in the room. Erin seeks out newcomers, shares the meal with them and engages them in conversation. People see their friends in a context where fellowship is possible without the demands of having to run to the next meeting or being late for worship. It is one of the best times for Erin to get to know new people and for members to get to know one another.

The third movement of the evening begins after the meal: teaching. Essentially, Sunday school is held again in the evening along with other related activities—but this time everyone is in the same position, coming out of the meal. There are not people from an early service staying late or people from the later service coming early—although it is possible to treat the three evening elements in an a la carte manner. But most people attend everything and there is a spirit of enjoyment about it all. People seem happy to be there rather than acting like they are doing their churchly duty.

There is the expectation that adults as well as the children will attend evening Christian education. And it lasts a full hour rather than the brief 30-35 minute morning Sunday school. There is even a full color poster for the Gathering's Sunday evening adult classes in the parish hall, giving the dates, topics and photos of the leaders. Some are multiple week mini-seminars and others are one-shot classes. Child care is available for infants through age four. Preschoolers through the third grade participate in Godly Play. For 4th and 5th graders there is Club 45, which is a hybrid of Sunday school and youth group. A separate track for children involves choir practice for kindergarten through grade 5. The two children's choirs on Sunday evening predate the Gathering and were continued. They combine hands-on musical

instruction with choir practice. For middle school and high school youth there are youth groups that meet in comfortable spaces they helped furnish themselves through eBay and Craigslist.

The Gathering time on Sunday afternoon and evening draws new people who are less comfortable with the typical Sunday morning service and also helps reduce the inevitable drop-off of attendance in the summer months. After a day at the lake, golf outings, playing (or watching) other sports, or just relaxing in the pleasant mountain setting of Western Virginia, people can go "as they are" to the Gathering. It fits most families and even young adults for whom Sunday morning may be a time to sleep in (or come back from a night out).

The key to the Gathering is that it includes everything in a three-hour span: worship, fellowship and education. A meal is the added bonus because it alleviates one of the problems people have with busy schedules. The necessity of meal preparation or going out to eat is avoided, as is the difficulty in getting everyone to sit down at the same time. The schedule actually works better than Sunday morning, which requires multiple worship services, many hours of child care, a very brief time for Sunday school and the necessity of providing something else for children during worship. In addition, there is the pressure to get the morning schedule over by 12:30 so people will not get too hungry.

The primary downside of scheduling the Gathering in addition to three Sunday morning services and Christian education is a very long day for clergy, staff and volunteers. At St. John's one priest officiates at all four services and may also lead the Sunday morning rector's forum at 10:15. Thankfully, the priests rotate their role in the worship services, but it is still a very long day for each of them. There also is the need to have sets of volunteers teaching Sunday school in the morning and the evening, as well as to lead children's church in the morning and youth groups and choir practice in the evenings. This is not to mention the need for welcoming teams at the services and Gathering meal teams to prepare and set up the food in the evening. Members wonder how the clergy and staff do what they do, and clergy and staff marvel at the number of active, committed lay volunteers at St. John's.

Instead of complaining, the leaders at St. John's see it as a long, but exciting and fulfilling day. Barkley said he shakes his head at the thought of other clergy who are done for the day after the 11:00 service.

Ministries and Procedures

St. John's is a high-energy church with many who admit to being type-A personalities. However, there is also a collegiality and playfulness among the staff and lay leadership that suggests a great deal of enjoyment about the work that is being done.

When Barkley first arrived he tried to do too much in his desire to know about everything that was happening and in trying to respond to every email and late night phone call. And once lay leaders and staff knew he was reading and responding to emails in the evening, they sent him more! It was a prescription for burnout, and was avoided by attending CREDO and learning more about how to take better care of himself and establish more healthy routines and boundaries.

The sense that exists now at St. John's is of a highly organized parish where things get done. This is necessary because of the size of the congregation. It is not a pastor-size church where one person is

able to be the point person in everything. There must be delegation and proper staffing — which is in place, but the nature of that staffing is unusual, other than the minister of music. He may be unusual himself, but his position is not. But the two associates to the rector are not typical staff positions: one deals primarily with “in-reach” and the other with “outreach,” or social ministry.

In-Reach and Outreach

St. John's has a rather amazing number of ministries and opportunities for involvement. All of these are described in its annual Ministries Book, titled *God Calling* in 2012. Included are the various music and worship-related ministries: adult and children's choirs, two handbell ringer groups, the acoustic band for the Gathering, the Altar Guild, Acolytes, Lectors, Ushers, Vergers, Greeters and Eucharistic Visitors. In addition to Christian education for children and adults Sunday morning and evening, there are opportunities for adult Christian education nearly every day of the week: Bible studies every Monday, Tuesday and Thursday; a four-year program of theological education on Tuesday; a men's prayer and accountability group twice a month on Friday; and a book club that meets once a month on Friday. For youth there is confirmation class, parish mission trips, a youth blog, and various outreach activities in addition to the youth groups that meet Sunday morning *and* evening. There also is fellowship, both in the form of groups and events, and the list of activities is long.

Newcomers and long-term members are unanimous in describing St. John's as a friendly, open church that is welcoming to newcomers without smothering them or appearing too needy for their participation and a share of their paychecks. According to one new member, “I felt immediately comfortable because there was a greeting staff composed of very warm, articulate people that hug you. They're very warm and welcoming and they're always there.” Another added, “They are very welcoming here . . . (But) you never get the idea that they're trying to boost their numbers. When you walk in the door you feel like they're sincerely interested in you. The attitude is not what can you do for the church, but what can we do for you? What are your needs?” Newcomers are not ignored like they are in many churches, but the level of attention does not border on desperation. A recent new member describes visiting another mainline church in Roanoke around the same time they were visiting St. John's. “(We) went back over to _____ for one week to try it out and see how that went. They called me five times, sent me a DVD, a basket full of cookies, and it's awful to say but it was a real turn off. I had been there one week!”

All churches describe themselves as friendly, but usually that means that the members are friendly to one another. Churches with the most uplifting and inspiring worship services may have no organized procedures for welcoming people. Other churches promise a greeting, perhaps at the coffee hour, but newcomers stand there and no one talks to them. Even when a church has organized procedures for welcoming visitors, they may lack meaningful follow-up. Frequently, the greeting is perfunctory, issued by people who are fulfilling a responsibility. Sometimes the follow-up is a hard sell or more attention than is desired. Few churches see greeting as the beginning of a process of bringing people into a community in which they are engaged, listened to, and given opportunities to participate to the degree that they feel comfortable with at the time.

The Reverend Erin Hensley was called as an assisting priest in early 2009 with a focus on hospitality and outreach. Once Sandy Webb was called to be a priest at St. John's, Erin's focus became welcoming, integration into the community and pastoral care. She said, "My area has been hospitality in the grandest sense of the word," from the welcome people receive to making sure people are not "falling off the tracks." It is rare for a congregation to have a staff member with a primary focus on hospitality, but perhaps it should not be. Churches should not take community formation and assimilation for granted. St. John's does not. It begins with the Greeting Ministry.

Most churches have ushers and many also have greeters. However, St. John's has an organized greeting ministry with one-on-one training by the chair of the Welcoming Committee and a six-page set of guidelines. The guidelines are not a set of rules, but rather common sense to ensure that new people are recognized, receive a warm welcome when they come in and a follow-up welcome when they leave. Greeters are not ushers and do not hand out worship bulletins. The primary goal is to engage newcomers in conversation (if desired), listen to them and respond to their needs. A gift bag is given to each first time visitor (if they want to receive it). Members of the vestry are in the area to answer questions that greeters cannot answer. Visitors are asked if they would sign the guest book, but are not pressured to do so. They are introduced to an usher or a church member by name, who then helps them find a seat.

The greeter sits near the back of the church so that they can talk to the guest again after the service and answer any questions they may have and ask if they would like to be introduced to the priest. Greeters tell visitors that they are pleased they came and hope they will return. Information about visitors, including contact information, is reported to greeting ministry leaders. It is an organized process, but not a regimented one; it forms the beginning of a relationship between the newcomer and the congregation.

Within the next two days after the worship service visit, Erin emails or calls the guest, saying, "I am glad you worshipped with us. I hope we can get to know you." There also is an invitation to talk over coffee or lunch in her office. Guests are never told what the church can do for them; rather she makes a point to say, "We want to know you." Information learned about visitors is shared with other staff: their church background, reasons they came to St. John's, how they found the church, how their life is, and so on. Someone from the welcome committee will write a handwritten note, saying again that they are glad the person worshipped here and that they look forward to getting to know them.

Within the next 2-4 weeks, Erin tries to meet with the guest "face to face and find out who they are, what they need. If they don't know what they need, I say, 'If you think you might, what could it be?' Or, 'What are your joys? What do you enjoy?'" Then I try to get them connected to other people, informally and also through existing groups and ministries." And there are newcomer's receptions in which new people and their families are invited to the rector's home for an evening meal and to meet St. John's staff, lay leaders and other new members and people on the way to becoming new members. New people can also participate in Explorer's classes for those who are new to the faith or to the Episcopal Church.

The staff realizes that people must become part of the community within the first year or two or they will not stay, and also that what happens early in the process means the most. If all of this sounds highly organized, it is. But it is not pushy or overbearing. People are allowed as much space as they need and are never pressured into a commitment or into a level of involvement that they do not want. Still, it is not taken for granted that people will involve themselves on their own. This may happen on the part of very extroverted people or families with children who fit the congregation's demographic, but for the most part, lack of attention to visitors and proper engagement of them will disrupt the process of incorporation.

New members speak about the attention, and of course the warmth, but also the substance that is there once they begin to look beyond the fact that people are glad to see them. And the invitation does not appear to be an effort to latch onto and *use* the new member. According to Ally (a new member), "The leadership is so non-judgmental. They don't make you feel you need to join the church and join a committee, and it's not an all-or-nothing approach. They customize it to how much or little you want to be involved, whether it's coming to church or participating in other activities within the church . . . My husband was starting a new job, I was pregnant, and we really wanted a church to go to, but we also didn't want to feel bad if we weren't on five committees."

Dianne (another new member) agreed with Ally, and added, "They don't shrink away from things like doubt. They'll bring it out in the open and if you have a doubt or question things or a different way of looking at things, it's okay, which is a very Episcopalian way of doing things . . . And don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. I also like the way they don't use the pulpit as a bully pulpit for their own ideas about politics."

For people who were not reared in the Episcopal Church and are contemplating further involvement, there is sometimes a felt need to know more about the church and its faith. One newcomer who attended another church in the area for a time wondered why they never had a new member class or an organized way to learn about the Episcopal Church. So after a year of waiting, he and his wife heard about the explorer's class at St. John's and started attending it, even before getting fully involved in worship.

Non-members are treated like members. According to Dan, "We were not members; we just started attending, and my wife had an operation. I said to Barkley at the Kiwanis club that we sure have got a lot of attention. He said, 'Was it unwanted?' I said, 'No, but we were just so shocked' . . . I think that right off made us feel real welcome. We are very pleased to be here and I'm involved in some of the outreach."

A few other newcomers pointed to the foyer groups that meet once a month to go to dinner in other member's homes or a restaurant. Many churches have such groups, but at St. John's they are one more effective way that community forms. According to Phil, a new member, "The group, over three or four months, gets to know each other and it encourages a closeness in the congregation that you wouldn't have otherwise. I know more about the people in my foyer group than anyone else in the church because we spend so much time together. It's just a wonderful thing." Groups that help newcomers

become friends with others in the church are particularly important as “avenues of entry” into an older congregation, to use Lyle Schaller’s term for it.

As important as the sense of welcome and the procedure for incorporating newcomers is the active commitment to outreach. Social outreach is an integral part of the life and mission of St. John’s. It is not an add-on the church does to help others who are less fortunate in order to feel better about itself. Many downtown and urban mainline churches have outreach (social) ministries, but few have a full-time minister for whom coordination of outreach is their primary job. The Reverend Sandy Webb was called to this ministry in the summer of 2010, but even before then outreach was a major priority for St. John’s. His role is oversight and coordination, not to do outreach *for* the congregation. The congregation and volunteers from outside the congregation do the outreach.

All churches do some form of cash assistance to people in need and for emergencies that arrive. At St. John’s the relief effort is more organized and more systemic than the norm. It takes place through the TRUE program: Temporary Relief of Unexpected Emergencies. TRUE volunteers provide compassion and support by listening to clients, connecting them with community resources and making grants for housing and utilities. Assistance was provided to more than 550 households in 2012.

Altogether, St. John’s has eight “signature” outreach ministries, including the Community Youth Program, which provides an after-school program for at-risk children and youth from a half dozen elementary and middle schools five days a week. Volunteers participate by providing tutoring, transportation and hosting visits to professional offices to expose students to career opportunities. The facilities for the Community Youth Program were the result of a tithe of the capital campaign that built the new building that houses offices, program and educational space. According to the Rector, “The tithe was set aside for not only outreach, but for outreach that would happen in the new building.” The space includes a computer lab among other things.

Congregations in Action is a relationship St. John’s and a few other downtown churches have made with a nearby elementary school. Volunteers help provide hospitality for teachers, healthy snacks for students, and mentorship in the form of tutors, lunch buddies and story tellers. Kimoyo is a program of St. John’s to promote sustainable development in Ghana through micro-loans and a medical clinic. Volunteers help Ghanaians start small family businesses through the micro-loan program or by assisting in a retail shop that helps support the ministry. Other ministries help the homeless, provide blood to the American Red Cross through four St. John’s Blood Drives, offer assistance to a summer educational and enrichment program for at-risk children, and work to develop and redevelop housing through partnerships with community agencies in Wise County and Roanoke.

Each of the outreach ministries provides individual members and the community as a whole the opportunity to express their Christian commitment in a tangible way. Volunteers also develop relationships with other ministry team members, deepening relationships within the congregation and the sense of St. John’s as a loving, caring community.

In addition, St. John’s hosts and houses, but does not run, a Head Start program for at-risk children in low-income families. It is federally funded so there is no integration between the church and the

program other than an end-of-the-year meeting with parents and church leaders. Ideally, the congregation would like to integrate a program with their own Parish Children and Head Start, but it would mean overcoming some federal regulations.

Moving into the Future

When Barkley Thompson arrived in 2007, the effort to restore the nave was still in its beginning stages. He remarked that the church looked "tired." One cannot imagine the way it must have looked then by the way it looks now. The nave is beautiful and magnificent. All of the 19th century oak woodwork was refinished. Original pew end caps were kept, but the pews themselves were replaced with seats that better fit 21st century Americans. The ceiling is vaulted with beams forming Victorian arches. In the chancel sits the freestanding altar under a large stained-glass window, framed on either side by ranks of the Aeolian Skinner organ, completed in 1948 and restored in 2010. In the oratory near the chancel are four stained-glass windows, depicting four Archangels. Along the sides of the nave are 22 more stained-glass windows. The floors are tiled in a mosaic pattern of deep red and dark blue. It is an impressive setting for worship, with an excellent organ and particularly good acoustics.

When St. John's added the new parish hall and the educational/office wing, the old church essentially became a new church with an old nave. And now with the nave restored, St. John's has an amazing facility. "If you build it, they will come" really is not true, but quality space is definitely a resource that allows ministry to happen in ways that it would not ordinarily. It also removes impediments that space often creates. Halls are unusually large; the narthex and parish hall are huge. Everything is clean and in good repair. There is plenty of space for Sunday school, youth groups, choir robing and practices, meetings, outreach facilities, meal preparation and everything else. It is an excellent facility and members are justifiably proud of it.

So even though the rector who helped St. John's revival is no longer there, the church is in a much better place than it was when he arrived. Not only is the facility something to be marveled at, but the staff is impressive, hard working and committed. They are also a remarkably cohesive team who combine leadership with a lack of personal insecurity. Things get done, changes are made and people work together.

Renewing and revitalizing a church does not happen often and only comes through good leadership and the development of a cohesive community. Unfortunately, conflict and dissention can rapidly undermine what has taken years to create. In the case of St. John's a strong, but not exceptional church became mired in conflict, leading to several years of serious decline. The story of its renewal necessarily begins with the story of that decline because conflict was the context out of which the congregation had to grow. Without the conflict the story of St. John's would have been much different. How it would be different is difficult to say, but it is possible that the experience of the conflict helped St. John's create a clearer sense of purpose and do things that it would not have done otherwise.

Normally, a congregation begins a capital campaign with a clear idea of what it wants to do and the money necessary to fund it. The leaders at St. John's did not know what they wanted to do or how much it would cost. After the lightning strike it was necessary to do something, but the nature of the

change evolved into a restoration project rather than a renovation and repair. In fact, repairing the organ—the need for which prompted the capital campaign—occurred *after* the nave was restored. Following the conflict, the congregation was being restored while the congregation was restoring its home. The two came together and the physical restoration was a symbolic expression of the communal restoration.

A restoration is typically an effort to put something back into its original condition. And to a certain extent, St. John's did that. But it went beyond making it as good as it was before. It was made better. The housing of the organ ranks was changed from an eyesore to beautiful woodwork. A subfloor was added to improve acoustics and the entire floor was tiled. Old wood stains were discovered and matched on improved seating. Old metalwork was replicated and expanded. All of the problems, as well as the effects of the aging of a 19th century church, were renovated and renewed.

A congregation that is open to renewal as well as renovation is also open to change rather than just recreating the past. So when Barkley Thompson arrived, the congregation was willing to change in its traditional worship format. Thus came the Gathering, which is also an example of renovation and renewal. It is both old and new, being neither a replication of the morning Rite II services or a "contemporary" service. It is also not a "blended" service in the sense of cobbling together disparate elements. Rather, like the nave, it is a true integration of the old and the new into something with integrity of its own.

For most churches, adding a new service, particularly one that is something new, typically takes the form of imitation and borrowing from other churches (often evangelical churches) in the hope of turning around the fortunes of a declining or plateaued congregation. For St. John's the need was not so much to turn around their fortunes, since they were improving already, but to do something new based on a less self-serving need. Change was possible because the people were open. The result was not an add-on service using a different style of worship that would hopefully attract young families and young people. Instead, the Gathering, in its three movements, provided a reimagining of congregational life. In some ways it represents a renovation of an older and more communal way of doing church, particularly those times when worship is followed by a meal. If the church meets as a celebration of their life in Christ, then the Gathering clearly models it.

Of course, St. John's also has three services on Sunday morning along with Sunday school, youth groups, the rector's forum and children's church. This is a lot of stuff, but it also means that a large number of people are involved in leadership and that is not necessarily a bad thing. Morning worship is well done at the two primary worship services and even though attendance has not grown, it also has not declined even though many members who once attended in the morning now attend in the evening. So, clearly, new people have been added even in the morning services.

But what of the future? St. John's has seen both the positive and negative effects of clergy leadership. Membership and attendance usually dips following the departure of a good leader and such is likely to be the case here. But with everything that is currently in place working as well as it is, the drop should not be large or long-lasting. St. John's has room to grow and the lives of new members and potential members are being changed.