

We're Just Glad You Joined Us: St. Ann's Episcopal Church, Windham, Maine

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The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society

St. Ann's Episcopal Church is not the typical historic New England Episcopal parish; it is relatively young, having been founded in 1973 amid the rolling hills, forests and small communities around Portland, Maine. Situated above a busy two-lane road, the church sits alone, looking somewhat like a large, converted bi-level farm house, albeit with the suggestion of a ship's prow on one end where the glass-sided entrance comes to a point. A large paved parking lot surrounds the church on three sides and includes a playground near the entrance, full of swings, picnic tables and a brightly painted apparatus for climbing. The overall physical effect is surprisingly inviting, drawing the visitor in, and saying that this is a welcoming place where children are valued. And the impression is a true one. Everyone is welcomed at St. Ann's. The sense of community is real, as is the sense of play.

Membership at St. Ann's stood at just under 400 at the end of 2013, and average worship attendance was 182. It is larger than most Episcopal congregations, but it is still not a large church. Not so many years ago, St. Ann's was considerably smaller. During the past seven years growth has been consistent and the church has experienced growing pains within its somewhat cramped facility. More space is needed for worship and Sunday school, and the church is considering adding a third morning worship service.

For many years issues related to growth and space were not problems at St. Ann's. Worship consistently averaged around 100 and finances had become marginal. The last full-time rector left after her salary was cut and the position subsequently became part-time. Before the turnaround, the most recent rector was a college professor who served St. Ann's at 7/12 time. Having had a full-time priest for many years, the cut-back to a part-time rector created a sense of loss among members, and there also was a perception that part-time leadership was not adequate for a 250-member parish. The consternation over the situation was shared by the professor/priest as well, who could not devote more time to the congregation because of his teaching position. Thanks to population growth in the area, the church remained on a relatively stable plateau, growing a bit one year, declining the next, but remaining near the 100 mark in attendance and unable to afford a full-time priest. The church added members almost every year, but increases to the rolls did not translate into increases in participation.

The situation changed in 2007 when the congregation raised enough funds to pay a full-time priest and Tim Higgins was called to be the rector at St. Ann's. No longer was St. Ann's a struggling semi-rural parish, led by dedicated laypeople and a part-time priest. Now it had dedicated laypeople and an energetic, full-time leader. Growth ensued and the congregation became much more than what it had been. How it got there and continues to grow is a story unique to St. Ann's, but the situation the church was in prior to the beginning of the story is not unusual among small churches in America.

A Somewhat Typical Parish with Great Potential

St. Ann's was known for being a welcoming, friendly parish. Members remarked on how well they were treated when they first visited. In addition, the area in which the church is located has experienced

steady growth. So why was a welcoming church in a growing area not growing too? The reason is that in Maine, like the rest of New England, a positive demographic environment only fosters a certain amount of stability. Growth requires being more than a typical church. In New England, regular churchgoing is not the norm and particularly so among the non-Catholic population. The norm is to be unaffiliated. And people are more likely to remark, "So you go to church?" than to ask, "Why don't you go to church?"

The area around St. Ann's appears rather rural, even though it is only about a 30-minute drive to downtown Portland. This area may be a suburb, but it does not seem suburban since it does not have large subdivisions or planned communities. Instead, individual houses and small developments have sprung up in patchwork fashion off the roads and highways in the area, resulting in fairly substantial population growth without the appearance of suburban sprawl. The population is not booming, however. It is growing steadily and expected to grow for years to come. The nearby villages still look small, but there is a shopping mall nearby. The growth in population includes a substantial increase in families with children. Yet again, this is not a typical suburb where families in one stage of the lifecycle overwhelm all others. It is an area of population diversity, at least in terms of age. People of all ages are in the area, although the substantial number of young families keeps the average age of area residents lower than the state level.

Newcomers to the area are typically a good thing for churches since the church is still a place that some people use to help become established in the community. This is doubly true for newcomer families with younger children. Many will at least check out the churches, even if they never join or participate regularly. The onus is always on the churches to respond appropriately to newcomers who are visiting. Churches that are not child-friendly or even people-friendly will not receive a second visit except from the most deeply dyed-in-the-wool Episcopalians. And there are relatively few dyed-in-the-wool Episcopalians in Maine.

For churches that do an adequate job at worship and that are friendly on the surface, but difficult to really become a part of, and that do not have many activities for members or systematic efforts to keep up with members, the result is a plateau or slow decline. St. Ann's was once a church with some of these characteristics. An individual who is now very active at St. Ann's described how older, long-time members shunned her efforts to help decorate the church for Christmas and dismissed her questions about outreach programs as having no value. She stayed at the church for the sake of her children, but as with many "lay-owned-and-operated" churches, newcomers are not always completely appreciated and accepted. Older members have got along without them and can continue to do so. They don't mind newcomers simply being around, however.

St. Ann's was not a toxic church by any means. Still, it was not particularly engaging. People received a good welcome and people did join, but the back door was as wide as the front. Some people joined; others left or stopped coming. The result was no growth in the midst of a growing area.

A small active membership combined with a bad economy led to cut-backs at St. Ann's. After the last full-time rector left in 1996, the congregation eventually hired an older, part-time priest who remained at the church for almost eight years. He was followed by an interim and then by many supply priests.

During this interim period a discernment committee was formed and key lay members felt that in this particular area of Maine it was possible to be more than a “low-key . . . little country church,” in the words of one member. But a full-time clergy person was needed. Apparently, however, the diocese did not think St. Ann’s had much potential at the time—which is not surprising given that most churches that revert to part-time clergy leadership never rebound into vital, growing congregations. Churches are hard to kill, but they are even harder to revitalize. Interestingly, when the Bishop reportedly told the leaders at St. Ann’s that they would “always be part-time,” it “really got under the skin of a lot of people and we set out to prove her wrong,” said one member. Having been angered and motivated by the Bishop’s perceived disrespect of their congregation, they did prove her wrong. They raised enough funds to pay a full-time rector for the next three years and the Bishop relented.

At the same time that the congregation was dealing with part-time interim leadership and discerning their future, an unusual situation arose regarding who would be their full-time priest. Attending St. Ann’s was a former Roman Catholic priest who had been received by the diocese as an Episcopal priest.

A New Priest and a Renewed Direction

Tim Higgins was a Roman Catholic priest for eight years before leaving the Catholic priesthood in 1995. Tim’s call to a vocation of ministry was clear and strong, but he had doctrinal and theological differences with local Bishops and traditional Catholic dogma that led to futile efforts to change the system and eventually to a temporary leave from the diocese. Acting first as a “renegade Catholic priest” who celebrated mass at an Episcopal church for the Catholic gay community and held masses at his own home for people who were not attached to a particular congregation, Tim’s temporary leave eventually became permanent.

After realizing that the hoped-for changes in the Roman Catholic Church would not come in his lifetime, Tim began to explore the Episcopal Church as a setting for doing full-time ministry. The Episcopal Bishop, Chilton Knudson, welcomed Tim and recognized his commitment and call to ministry, but asked him to begin the process of becoming an Episcopal priest by becoming actively involved in an Episcopal church. He had to become an Episcopalian first.

As it happened, Tim became involved in St. Ann’s, Windham. In the summer of 2001 Tim was embraced and welcomed by Roy Partridge, the part-time priest, Christine Bennett, the vocational deacon, and the congregation. In just a few months he became a chalice bearer, began to preach occasionally, and even led an inquirers class. Thus began a three-year process of mentorship, study, postulancy, acceptance by the vestry, candidacy and finally reception by the diocese, which happened in 2004. After becoming an Episcopal priest, Tim did some supply work in several congregations, but continued to worship and participate regularly at St. Ann’s. After working for several years as a social worker and doing ministry-related activities on the side (including many weddings), Tim obtained a full-time position as a chaplain at a state-run juvenile corrections facility in the area.

When the rector, Roy Partridge, left St. Ann’s in 2005, the position at St. Ann’s became open. Tim, who had joined as a layperson, was now a priest participating in this congregation, actively preaching at services and immersed in the community. So it was natural that the congregation began talking about

him as possibly serving as their priest. This was a very unusual situation for an Episcopal congregation. An interim could not be called as rector, but Tim was not an interim. He was a part of the parish. At the congregation's annual meeting in 2006 Tim stood up and acknowledged that he was the "elephant in the room." Although he said he would love to serve as their priest if they called him, he could not do it on the current part-time basis. Now with a wife and three children, he could not leave his full-time chaplain position. Tim's statement created a stir in the congregation, and gave additional weight to the sentiment among many church leaders that the current seven-twelfths salary was inadequate. That led to the meeting with the Bishop who told them that they could never afford a full-time rector, which catalyzed the successful effort to raise additional funds in 2007. The position was then open as full time; Tim applied immediately and within two months was called to be the rector at St. Ann's. In August 2007 he became their rector and has continued to lead the congregation since that time.

New leadership often results in a surge of growth, but it just as frequently results in more serious losses. Growth typically occurs when the new clergy leader is a good fit for the congregation and significant changes are made during the "honeymoon period" of the first two years. At St. Ann's the new rector was not a stranger who had to get to know the congregation and figure out the problems and mobilize the congregation to solve them. Tim knew the congregation well and it was clear what had to be done to revitalize the church and renew the congregation. Tim also knew the potential of their setting. As noted earlier, the area was growing in population. Also, there was very little competition from other Episcopal congregations. Further, many disaffected Roman Catholics were in the community—a population that Tim was especially able to speak to. But St. Ann's had to become much more than a nice rural congregation in order to realize its potential and close its back door.

Changes were made to the physical appearance of the church and also to the way the congregation approached creating community and a nurturing environment for all ages. Neglect was all around, as is often the case in an organization for which change had meant adjusting to having less.

The church looked a bit tired and worn. Church signs were old and hard to see; the parking lot was small, unpaved and often muddy; the floor of the nave was covered by a dirty, 30-year-old carpet; folding chairs were literally "a pain in the butt" and lighting was dim. There were many problems to be addressed and they were, thanks to a clear evaluation of the situation and funds accumulated when the church was in its interim between rectors.

Efforts were made to increase the visibility of the church in the area through a committee that developed a new website, listings and invitations in local newspapers, new brochures and other vehicles for getting the word out. But marketing is useless unless those being invited find a meaningful, welcoming experience when they come.

People began to check out St. Ann's and found a church that was particularly welcoming to families with children. This attitude was modeled by the priest, who had young children of his own, and it represented an expansion of the existing welcoming nature of the congregation. "Young children could come here and families could come and they weren't going to be shushed . . . the priest wasn't going to say, 'You need to keep it quiet. You need to stand in the back of the narthex.' There was a welcoming attitude that changed," said one long-term member.

In addition to the more genuinely welcoming atmosphere, the priest and a newly energized welcoming committee began a systematic and now ongoing effort to keep in touch with members and visitors. Not that "in-reach" was completely neglected in the past, but it is easy for a church to let concentrated efforts slide somewhat. Keeping up with a congregation can be a great deal of work. In this case, making up for past neglect and making sure that everyone was contacted was a major challenge.

Tim used several new approaches to reach out to less active members and to connect with more active members. He invited currently active members to write down the name of someone who had not been at St. Ann's for a while on a card, along with their contact information. In addition, people were asked to write down the name of a person who had never attended St. Ann's. A letter was sent to two lists: less active members and new people. A short time thereafter, the person who gave the names on the card followed up with a phone call and a personal invitation to a pot-luck at the church. This process was done several times during Tim's first two years at St. Ann's.

People who visit St. Ann's receive a genuine (not desperate) welcome. It is somewhat like being received into the home of relatives who you do not really know yet. And like a family setting, there is a lot of greeting and conversation, milling around and laughter, with children in the mix running around and practicing what they will do in the service. The personal greeting people experience in the church is followed up by a personal note from the rector a few days later. When they return they will be remembered and welcomed back.

The welcoming committee walks through the membership directory and the list of visitors on a regular basis, household by household, and talks about new people who recently attended and also people who have not attended lately. After a few visits a member of the welcoming committee delivers home-baked bread to the newcomer's residence, no matter where they live. Members of the welcoming committee also call people who have not been seen in a few weeks. It can be something of a tedious process, but it ensures that no one falls through the cracks. The approach is low-key, in keeping with the congregation's ethos of "no guilt." People are told things like, "Don't want to be annoying, but we love you and miss you. The Christmas fair is coming up and we'd love to see you there. And what is going on in your life?" The personal, one-on-one contact has made a major difference both in terms of incorporating people into the life of the church and in helping form community among members of the church—including newcomers and long-tenured members.

The rector used an even more personal approach to help establish relationships with the broader membership: home visitation. He took the directory, beginning with people who primarily attended the early morning (8 a.m.) service. Appointments were made and during his first year the rector visited people in their homes three days a week from 3-8 p.m. In some cases he was invited to dinner, in others it was a 45-minute visit. Visits to retirees were usually made in the morning. The visits were low-key, not interviews or interrogations. He said things like, "I want to get to know you"; "What are any pastoral care needs you may have?" and "Tell me the story of you and St. Ann's, how did that happen?" People would often ask Tim what they can do for him and if he would bless their homes. And then they would pray. Tim visited 70 households during his first year at St. Ann's. Since that time, Tim has continued to visit people, making appointments with all the new people and continuing his efforts to

visit every member of the church. Now having visited around 4/5 of the congregation, Tim visits homes two-three days a month instead of three days a week.

All of this effort is somewhat unusual, but perhaps it should not be. The congregation is not an audience at St. Ann's where people attend worship and then go home without much interaction with others. It is a community that thrives through communication, contact and mutual support. It has made a huge difference in the substance of the community, the support people who are in need receive, and in the fact that while people still leave St. Ann's, they do not drift away unnoticed. God has sent many people to St Ann's, according to the rector, and the congregation is humbled and honored by their presence.

A Focus on Fun, Fellowship and Family

St. Ann's is described by everyone as being a loving, welcoming community where people come to "pray and play." In the words of one now-active member, "I came here with a newborn and it was just the authentic love and joy that I experienced from people. Even though I had a crying baby in my arms, everyone loved it." Another said, "Nobody stares at you like you are an outsider. Everybody's welcomed." When trying to describe the nature of St. Ann's, the rector says, "We want to be the most welcoming, comfortable, hospitable place on the face of the planet. When folks come here, it's family. We embrace you and love you and you are part of the family. Family is rooted in the love of Jesus Christ, which we are then able to give back in outreach."

As is the case in all Episcopal congregations, worship is central. The liturgy is traditional, but the overall tone is not formal. Instead, the services are described as "fun," and as a celebration. "At every service we laugh, and when we exchange the peace, that's when the crowd goes wild. People are hugging. And I go to the people who are visiting and say, 'You'll get used to this,'" said one member of the welcoming committee. Sermons, following the lectionary, are personal, informal and accessible, with both humor and meaning. The service feels like a family gathering that draws in people who are not yet part of the family. Children, coming into the service from Sunday school and the youth group mostly sit together in the front couple of rows rather than with their parents—with young children often sitting on the laps of older kids. During the Lord's Prayer the congregation holds hands, and at communion, Tim greets each person by their first name.

The sense of family is further accentuated by the monthly "family Sunday" service in which Tim preaches an interactive sermon, geared toward the children, but applicable to adults. The children answer questions that Tim asks, and their answers provoke both laughter and joy. The children also take a more prominent role as participants in the service, bringing the gifts, doing readings and singing in the choir.

Although the familial culture that is evident in worship might seem uncomfortable and maybe even threatening to some people, the welcome is so genuine and with no pressure that even self-professed "non-joiners" find themselves at ease. Without pressure to join or expectations of commitment, people "don't feel intimidated when they come to the church . . . no one is saying "We want you to come every week and do this," said a member of the vestry. Yet the very people who were drawn to the church because of the lack of pressure to participate regularly found themselves doing just that. One now-

active female member said, "I just became more and more comfortable with the people here and it has gotten to the point where I can't imagine not coming here. It's become part of our life. I thought going to church on Sundays I had to give something up. I gave up nothing and I gained a lot. I may have given up sleeping a little later on Sunday, but I can't believe this community. My kids love it." Despite the Mainer/New Englander tendency for self-reliance, people find a supportive home in the congregation, provoking one new member to say, "Wow, this is what a community is like. I've been a Yankee too long."

In addition to the lack of perceived pressure to become involved, there is a spirit of affirmation and openness. "There is no gate-keeping and folks are affirmed for who they are," said a member. "Everybody gets a voice," said another. There is no guilt about serving or not serving, or even attending or not attending. People are accepted regardless of their religious or secular backgrounds and are invited to express and explore their faith at their own pace and in their own way within an environment of tolerance.

People are invited to serve according to their passions and also to end their service in whatever they are doing, when the time comes. Getting volunteers is not a problem because the opportunities for service are great and there is no pressure to commit to an area of service out of guilt or a feeling of responsibility. And with open communication and a willingness to change, new opportunities are always open. If anything, "We go out of our way to over-communicate," said a vestry member. It is never the priest or the vestry making unilateral decisions. Concerns and worries are voiced, even when they are uncomfortable.

An Activist Orientation

Although most churches have special events, meals and gatherings for fellowship, St. Ann's has a remarkable calendar of events that help reinforce the sense of community and create the family feel that all members point to as characteristic of the congregation. "We try to involve a lot of people in a lot of things," according to a member of the vestry.

Many of the special events are coordinated by the Fun and Fellowship Committee. The goal of the committee is to create events that bring all ages together and to find fun things for people to do. There is a Halloween party, a harvest pot luck each fall, a "fiesta luncheon," a Portland Seadogs baseball game, a movie night for the kids with dessert for adults, a Christmas fair and a Mardi Gras party with a variety show. To raise money for the Christmas fair, the group holds a wine tasting, which becomes a party of its own. A few other wine tastings are held during the year. A parish-wide retreat is being held over Labor Day weekend at the diocesan camp. Even more unusual is the annual canoe and kayak cruise down the river from one member's house to another's, an event which is held on a Sunday and includes a worship service at the end of the trip. In addition to these larger events, there is the more typical Shrove Tuesday pancake breakfast and founding day anniversary pot-luck. Regular activities include "lunch and liturgy" every Tuesday and a monthly family breakfast on Sunday morning.

All churches have committees and some committees actually do things other than holding obligatory meetings. What seems different about St. Ann's is the activist nature of the committees and its other

organized groups. Whether it is the welcoming committee reaching out to new people or inactive members, the strategic planning committee looking at what might be done in the future, the Lazarus committee helping with receptions for funerals, the coffee hour group making baked goods, the Advent wreath group, healing team, prayer chain, altar guild and a host of other organized groups—the focus is on action. The purpose is not simply to have the regularly scheduled meeting, unless an action takes place at the meeting. And since the meetings are about ministry and people are engaged in doing something they feel strongly about, the committees and groups help form community rather than being a necessary responsibility. They are avenues for people to become involved, and in being involved people come to belong. Children and youth are included, of course, through Sunday school, youth groups, nursing home visits, Vacation Bible Camp and regional youth group events, and there is an unusually large number of acolytes (25) for a relatively small church.

Pastoral Care and Outreach: Both Formal and Informal

Pastoral care at St. Ann's occurs in formal ways through the actions of the priest, the pastoral care committee and the Healing Team. But it also occurs informally through the actions of members as they reach out to one another in times of need. In a sense, the ethos of mutual support and the formation of community create a sense that one is not alone with the problems that life necessarily creates in people's lives. Stories abound regarding how people helped and how people who were helped were able to help others. In fact, the division between formal action and informal helping is often blurred. According to one member of the pastoral care committee, "I don't know what my ministry is, (I guess) it is just to be around." Her response prompted another member to say, "It is pastoral care, caring for the elderly." This is what she did anyway, even though she happened to be on the committee with that formal responsibility.

The pastoral care committee meets and goes through the parish directory on a regular basis. Members report what they know about people on the list and respond to needs as they arise. A group of committee members calls four people in the directory each month and tells them that they are praying for their family and engages in conversations about their lives. Names are passed to the healing team and prayer chain. The healing team makes home visits to members, prays with them and addresses emotional, physical and spiritual needs.

"This is a place of safety, a place of comfort, of acceptance. A place of friendship and really family . . . you can really let go and be raw and real and talk about your struggles and really know that you're in a good place and that there are people here that are going to walk the road with you," said one relatively new member who now serves as education director. She went on to say, "I've believed in God my whole life and I understood the rituals . . . but it wasn't really until I came here that I met so many other people who were not just about church on Sunday morning. We're about walking in love, every day all day and (even) when it's hard, you're still doing it. You pick up the phone and call someone else. It wasn't until I became part of this community that God became a daily thing and not just a Sunday morning thing."

The familial nature of St. Ann's has helped transform outreach from benevolent giving to communal sharing. The church helps sponsor a Monday Meal program, which is a free meal given in the

community for elderly persons. It began as a once-a-month meal, with the responsibility shared by other congregations during the month. But it has become a weekly event during the summer months and is open to all ages. "We get kids from four years old up to 84 years old," said Wendy Rozene, the deacon who helps coordinate outreach. Members of St. Ann's go to other participating congregations to help when it is not their week. During the summer children from St. Ann's help set the tables, put out the placemats and set the silverware. "We dish the food up on a cart and the kids wheel it down and deliver it to the table. It's a fun operation, it really is. The meal isn't until 5:30, but (people) are there at 4:00 waiting for us. So we have tea and coffee out and they'll come and just visit. The official name is Food and Fellowship, Inc. and it really is that," said Wendy. In this way, a soup kitchen becomes something much more than a way to help the elderly get some extra calories and save money. The meals are yet another way the members of St. Ann's experience and facilitate community, as well as give back to the community at large. A new twist to the program is a garden on the large property, which will be tended by members and supply both food and income for Monday Meals and the town's Food Pantry.

Growing Pains

Given the growth that has taken place at St. Ann's, and the welcoming spirit, there is great concern about losing the character that has allowed the church to grow and that members value so much. In the words of one member, "You can't stop people from coming." And members realize the fact that when they come and are welcomed, many will join. Already the church is "bursting at the seams" according to the rector and there is no unused space. There is not enough storage space, few meeting rooms and no additional space for Sunday school. Change is inevitable of course, but more urgent at St. Ann's because of its growth. Still, the prospect of expansion of space and the possibility of additional programming and staff is not as worrying as the potential change in character, since staff and physical changes only require more funds. Of course, given the financial history of St. Anne's, the congregation is and will be very careful about overextending itself. Many of the members remember when the church could only afford part-time clergy. The danger may be in trying to do too little rather than doing too much.

The congregation can deal with its financial needs, even if it does so in a frugal Maine way. But can a congregation that sees itself as a family retain that family sense when it grows larger? Will people get lost among a much larger membership? Will a larger membership create a sense of anonymity and lessen the sense of mutual support and caring? It is a great worry among some members. They realize that they have something special here and they do not want to lose it. One member remarked that, "You can lose that familiar connection when you get too big," but then she caught herself and changed her words from "too big" to "when you get a lot of people." And therein lies the concern. Does getting a lot of people necessarily mean you are too big? Getting a lot of people means that the church is doing something right. God is bringing new people in according to the rector and parish leaders; they are becoming part of the community and lives are being changed. Yet members are worried that they will "start saying things like 'I don't know the names of half the people in this room anymore and I used to know everybody.'" It is already beginning to happen.

One approach that St. Ann's tried to enhance community is through neighborhood faith sharing groups. Some of these have been home Bible studies, others Advent and Lenten groups. But even though they

seemed helpful when operating, they did not last. Part of the problem is the distances in semi-rural Maine. A larger problem may be that such groups have been difficult for almost all churches to sustain in the American setting. The pattern of initial success and meaningful experience tends to give way to the difficulties of travel, babysitters and time constraints. Most groups wind down and eventually dissolve.

So at present, St. Ann's lives in the tension of growth and the worry that the thing that makes it special will be lost. It hasn't happened yet, but it remains a concern and that means the congregation must work to make sure it doesn't happen. Moving forward in faith, renovations to the existing facility and an addition began in May 2014, and are scheduled for completion in October. There will be more Sunday school rooms, multi-purpose meeting rooms, more storage, an even larger parking lot, a large pantry to support outreach and space for community activities. The congregation is expecting to welcome even more guests in the future.

What Makes St. Ann's Different

Most small congregations have a strong sense of community. Such is the nature of small groups. However, in many congregations that strong sense of community actually repels newcomers rather than giving them a reason to join. People who would be attracted to being part of a nurturing group cannot penetrate the familial walls. In some cases newcomers are treated as outsiders and receive no real welcome. In other cases newcomers are welcomed but not accepted into the community. At St. Ann's newcomers are both welcomed and accepted into a community that is more than a social group. It is the beloved community, Christ-centered, that views all people as having value and who can add their own unexpected gifts. What is also different about St. Ann's are the organized efforts to welcome newcomers and incorporate them into the community and to provide continuing opportunities for involvement and pastoral care. What would be a friendly, welcoming church is a growing, friendly, welcoming church that takes care of its own. It is a "soft place to land," said the rector, which does not take that nature for granted. People are told, "We're just glad you joined us," and they mean it both in terms of that visit and also later on when joining means something much more.

Being a family means more than welcoming traditional nuclear families. The church as family includes all ages, with older people serving as surrogate grandparents and single people included as brothers and sisters. Even the youth see themselves as older brothers and sisters to the young children in the parish. The church is not immune to family problems, of course. Members have divorced and people have behaved badly. Still, the level of support in times of struggle helps people through such situations, reconciliation often happens, and people are not alone—afraid that others will judge and treat them differently.

St. Ann's is a vital, growing church that incarnates the love of Christ. In the community, people are nurtured and loved. Growth will create challenges to the nature of the community and the rector will not always be able to remember the names of everyone taking communion. Nevertheless, church leaders are well aware of the challenges and are not afraid of change. After all, change has allowed the church to become much more than it was just a few years ago. The Spirit is at work and the people of St. Ann's believe that the future is bright.