

RenewalWorks: What We Are Learning

Executive Summary

RenewalWorks is a vital ministry serving the Episcopal Church in a time when commitment to spiritual growth needs to be renewed. The process invites congregants to reflect on their own spiritual vitality and to examine the ways that the church supports them in their spiritual journey. We offer this work in the confidence that the spiritual health and vitality of our church is inseparable from the spiritual health and vitality of its individual members. The information that follows illustrates what we are learning about our denomination. The news is challenging. The need is urgent. We contend with complacency and low expectations. We are an older denomination, with membership numbers in decline. Spiritual practices and embrace of beliefs are low relative to other denominations. Leaders often feel depleted, even defeated. At the same time, there is hope, as we can identify specific, quantifiable actions that can be taken, catalysts which can build cultures of discipleship and help the Episcopal Church grow spiritually.

Introduction to RenewalWorks

RenewalWorks, a ministry of Forward Movement, offers a process to gain insight into the spiritual health and the potential for spiritual growth in congregations. This process includes an assessment (an online inventory) and a set of workshops for congregational leaders to understand the results of the inventory and to map out an action plan in response. Members of the RenewalWorks staff provide coaching and suggest resources, but people within the congregation lead the work. RenewalWorks is much more than just a program; it offers a much-needed diagnosis for a challenged denomination and follows up with the encouragement of proven catalysts that can make a difference in the life of a church.

RenewalWorks began as a ministry of Forward Movement in July 2013 with this vision: to build cultures of discipleship in Episcopal congregations by encouraging a singular focus on spiritual growth. RenewalWorks offers a clearly delineated and supported process to refocus and rejuvenate parishes by increasing spiritual growth, helping congregants grow in love of God and love of neighbor.

The RenewalWorks Process

RenewalWorks begins with a commitment from clergy and lay leadership to explore the spiritual status of the congregation. With that commitment, members of the congregation are invited and encouraged to take a Spiritual Life Inventory (SLI). This survey of spiritual beliefs and practices provides conclusive, quantitative analysis of the Episcopal Church and its spiritual vitality, based on the collective results from nearly 200 participating congregations and 12,000 parishioners. The insights gleaned from the inventory are significant, but that is not its only value. When a congregation takes the inventory, the reflections and conversations that follow are also valuable, providing impetus for clarifying and reinforcing core beliefs and practices of the Anglican tradition.

After the inventory, the process continues in a congregation, as a small, select workshop team meets for four sessions to answer four questions, one per session:

1. **Where have we been?** This workshop explores the spiritual journey of the congregation and also considers the spiritual journey of the individuals on the workshop team.
2. **Where are we now?** The results of the inventory provide insight into the current state of the congregation.
3. **Where do we feel called to go, in light of the inventory results?** The workshop team explores a few next steps for the congregation, weighing strengths and growth opportunities, asking what God is calling this church to work on.
4. **How will we get there?** A limited number of action steps to deepen the spiritual lives of our congregants are identified, with discussion of how the workshop team will bring the rest of the congregation along.

What We Are Learning

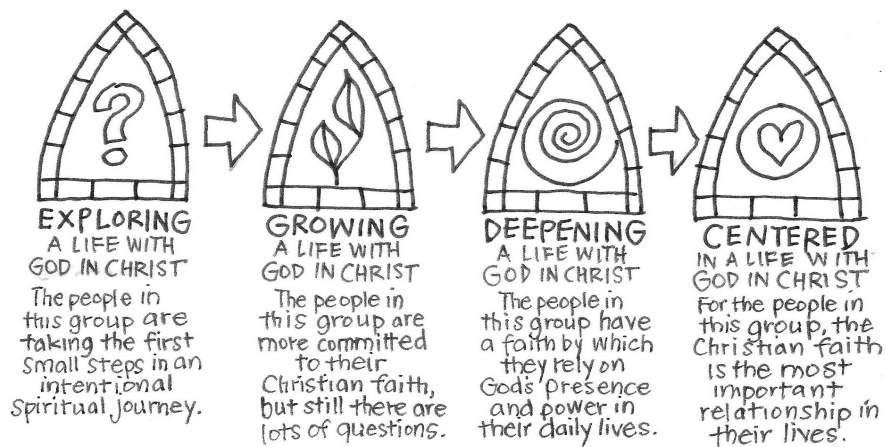
In three years, over 12,000 Episcopalians have taken the inventory, representing nearly 200 parishes. Fifty-one percent of churches were in the South, 26 percent in the Midwest, and 18 percent in the Northeast. Forty-seven percent of the churches reported 101-250 parishioners. Respondents describe themselves as mainline or traditional. They are older (75 percent over age 50), white (91 percent white non-Hispanic), wealthy (60 percent report income of \$75,000 or above) and long-tenured in their churches (54 percent have attended for more than ten years).

Responses to the inventory indicate a distinct Episcopal culture, often characterized by a passive and complacent approach to life in the church. Many people attend Sunday services but do not feel personally responsible for practicing faith outside of that weekly service. Other Episcopalians report interest in learning more about a deeper spiritual journey and in being challenged. But they are not sure how to take the next steps. Still others report that the church could do a better job of supporting their individual spiritual journeys.

The research behind RenewalWorks indicates a spiritual continuum, with respondents falling into four groups on that continuum. Those four stages include:

- **Exploring a life with God in Christ**
- **Growing in a life with God in Christ**
- **Deepening in a life with God in Christ**
- **Centered in a life with God and Christ.**

We will look more closely at these areas in the following pages. (For more insight into this continuum, a short book called *Footsteps* is available through Forward Movement.) While the continuum is depicted here as a linear model, which has some biblical precedent, one might also think of the continuum as four concentric circles, with spiritual growth a process of moving closer to the center.



Seventy-three percent of Episcopal respondents identified themselves in the first two stages of spiritual growth; in other words, they consider themselves to be at an early, perhaps less mature stage of spiritual development. According to their demographic information, these respondents are older in age and have attended their church for longer than ten years, which raises the question: Why haven't more people developed a deeper relationship with God in Christ?

Data show that a commitment to daily spiritual practices is a strong driver for movement from the second to the third stage of spiritual growth. Most respondents report that their church does not provide resources that teach, model or encourage these kinds of spiritual practices. For instance, while the Episcopal Church stresses the importance of prayer, many congregations fail to offer teaching on prayer as part of church programming or Christian formation. Not surprisingly, respondents indicate a lack of competence or confidence in leading group prayer or praying the Daily Office. In a period where spiritual practices such as guided yoga and meditation have become prevalent in the culture, church programs that focus on training in prayer seem to have diminished.

Data also indicate that Episcopal congregations embrace a strong serving culture. However, there is often a lack of clarity about why that service is an expression or outgrowth of Christian identity, sometimes making it difficult to distinguish church mission and outreach from the good work of other nonprofit organizations. We have also learned that the ability to evangelize and to tithe is limited until parishioners have moved further along the spiritual continuum.

Parishioners in the first two stages (exploring and growing) of the continuum are highly dependent on the church—and specifically the clergy—to help teach, guide and mentor them. With 73 percent placing themselves in the first two stages, the role of clergy in spiritual development is significant. This can represent a challenge: Clergy report that the many demands of their jobs pull them away from teaching about personal spiritual practice as well as from being fed themselves in their own spiritual journey. We often hear clergy expressing concern that they have lost touch with why they entered ministry: They have lost touch with their first love. At the same time, clergy also indicate that they are hesitant to issue a challenge to their parishioners, to elevate expectations amid diminishing attendance and an overall decline in interest in religion.

Parishioners, however, say they want leadership that encourages and teaches them to grow in their faith. Sixty percent want the church to help them develop a relationship with God in Christ. Fifty-seven percent want to be challenged to grow and take next steps spiritually. When asked how their current church was doing in those criteria, only 42 percent said they were extremely satisfied or very satisfied with the way their church helps them develop a relationship with Jesus Christ. Thirty-eight percent felt they were extremely or very satisfied with how the church challenged them to grow and take next steps. So we find that parishioners' desire for more formation, their hunger for spiritual growth can exist in tension with their time constraints and the many demands on the clergy. Many people report that the greatest obstacle to their own spiritual development comes from their busy schedules. Many clergy report that they are pulled in so many directions that they cannot focus as they would like on their own spiritual growth or the spiritual growth of members of their congregation.

Where We Are Spiritually

Let's take a closer look at the four stages of exploring, growing, deepening, and centered.

Exploring

Eighteen percent of parishioners identify in the first stage of spiritual growth (exploring), an interesting insight given the fact that many respondents also indicated that they have been in the church longer than ten years. People in this first stage are exploring the basic beliefs expressed in the Episcopal tradition. They are drawn to the beauty, indeed the majesty of the liturgy, particularly Holy Eucharist. At the same time, they are eager for a deeper understanding of the sacraments and for help from the church in that regard. They affirm belief in God, though they are not sure what faith claims they would make about Christ. Generally speaking, faith is not a significant part of their life on a day-to-day basis.

Growing

The majority surveyed (55 percent) identify themselves in the second stage of spiritual growth (growing). They are committed to the Christian faith but still have many questions and have not developed a personal relationship with God in Christ. Again, people in stages 1-2 of the continuum are highly dependent on the church and especially the clergy to help them grow in faith. In order for them to grow spiritually, the development of a relationship with God in Christ is key. Often this is accomplished by exploration of personal spiritual practices during the week, when they are not in church. These practices may include prayer, time in solitude, and reflection on scripture.

Deepening

Twenty-three percent of parishioners identify themselves in the third stage of spiritual growth (deepening their relationship with God in Christ). They describe having a personal relationship with God. They are making a transition to increasing the value of that personal relationship with God over their church membership. They feel close to Christ and depend on him daily for guidance. For this group, opportunities to have spiritual friendships, mentors or small group-connections are especially important; these provide a place of accountability and support where they can challenge and discuss their faith journey.

Centered

Four percent of the respondents identify in the fourth stage of spiritual growth (centered). That does not mean that the spiritual journey is over, or that this group does need any more growth. But for this small group, a personal relationship with God in Christ is the most important relationship in their lives.

Moving People from One Stage to Another

Key catalysts for spiritual growth

Research indicates identifiable catalysts that can bring transformation and spiritual growth in the lives of parishioners. Four catalysts in particular seem to make a difference:

- **Engagement with scripture:** At every stage along the continuum, engagement with scripture is transformative. When Episcopal congregations go through the RenewalWorks process, one of the most common responses is to find a way to engage with scripture as a community. In the first stages of our work, many churches chose to read *The Story*, published by Zondervan. More recently, Forward Movement has published *The Path*, which seems particularly useful for Episcopalians. The Bible Challenge is another resource that has helped in this engagement process.
- **The transforming power of the eucharist:** For Episcopalians, especially for those beginning an intentional spiritual journey with God in Christ, participation in the eucharist is key. The more that churches can help people grow in understanding this mysterious sacrament, the further people move along the spiritual continuum.
- **A deeper prayer life:** Research indicates a lack of confidence and satisfaction with prayer life. A discernible deepening of relationship with God happens in the same way any relationship grows—through time spent in conversation. The more that we call people to an active prayer life, marked by the varieties

of prayer experience (confession, praise, intercession, thanksgiving, contemplation), the more they will grow.

- **The heart of the leader:** None of this transformation will be possible without the commitment of the leader to his or her own discipleship, including clarity of belief, dedication to spiritual practice, and service in the world. Leaders can't give what they don't have. RenewalWorks seeks to support leaders in this journey and help them stay connected to the reasons they got into ministry in the first place, again, to their first love.

Archetypes

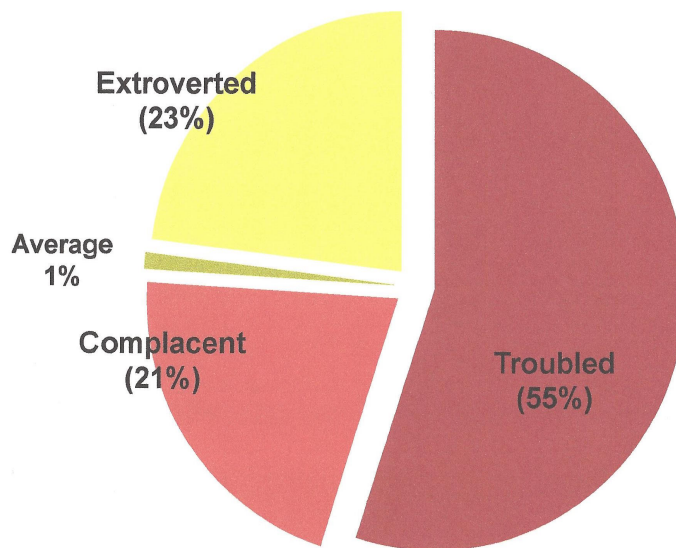
The research on which RenewalWorks is based started fifteen years ago in a large non-denominational church in suburban Chicago. That work of exploring spiritual vitality in congregations represents input from more than 2,000 congregations and over half a million people. That research led to the identification of eight archetypes of congregations, learnings that are detailed in a book entitled *Rise* by Cally Parkinson.

In our research with Episcopal congregations, we find that all but a few Episcopal Churches fall into one of three archetypes, described below:

- **Troubled:** Fifty-five percent of Episcopal congregations fit in an archetype described as troubled. It may be helpful to think of them as restless or hungry (rather than conflicted or in crisis). Basically, these congregations are marked by a desire for greater spiritual growth; they have a hankering for more from their church, and in particular, from their clergy. They are not satisfied with what they are receiving. There is great opportunity for clergy to work with folks in these congregations.
- **Extroverted:** Twenty-three percent of Episcopal congregations fit in an archetype described as extroverted. These congregations are deeply committed to service in the world, mission, and outreach. Indeed, among denominations surveyed, Episcopalians show a distinctive commitment to this kind of service. But among Episcopalians, there is a limited correlation between the call to service and spiritual beliefs and practices, making the church not all that different from many nonprofit organizations.
- **Complacent:** Twenty-one percent of Episcopal congregations fit in an archetype described as complacent. This is perhaps the most difficult

archetype to shift in terms of transformation. These congregations are marked by low expectations of transformation and resistance to change and challenge.

Episcopal congregations represent strongly in these three archetypes, which indicates a distinct and deeply rooted denominational culture that may not be easy to change. Change will come slowly. There are no quick fixes. Long-term transformation will require a culture shift, not just implementation of some new program.



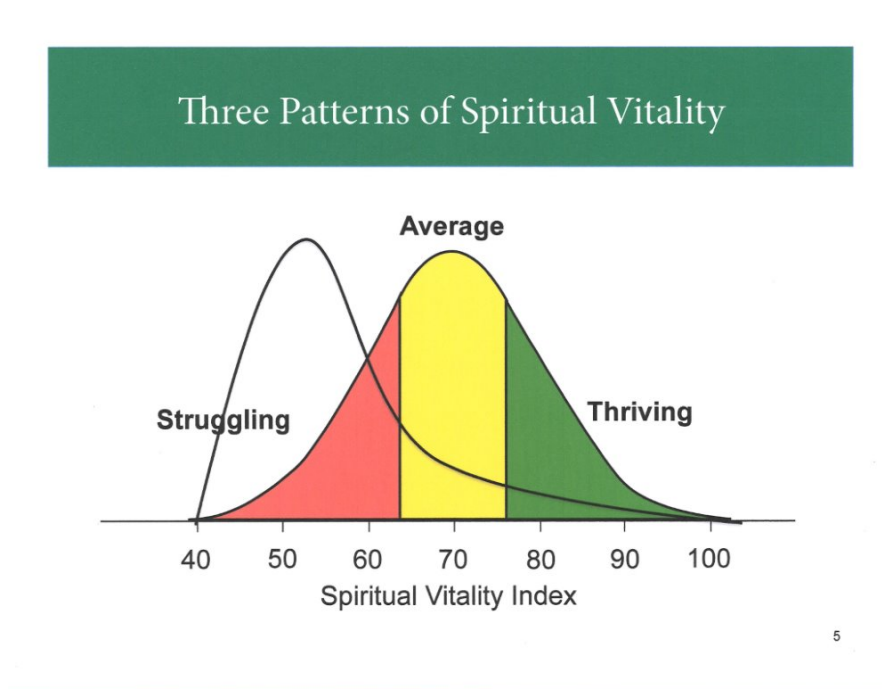
The Spiritual Vitality Index

One of the tools used in this research is the Spiritual Vitality Index, which weighs three factors in measuring the spiritual vitality of congregations. These three factors include:

- The church’s role in the spiritual life of its members: How does the church foster or impede spiritual growth?
- Personal spiritual practices: How do folks deepen their spiritual lives when they are not in church?
- Faith in action: How do people act in service in the world?

Based on collected responses from congregants, each parish receives a numerical indicator of their vitality, ranging from 40 to 100. While not all congregations embrace the idea that spiritual vitality can be evaluated in this way, the index provides an insightful picture of spiritual vitality.

The graph below depicts three patterns of spiritual vitality: struggling, average, and thriving. Based on our research, most Episcopal congregations find themselves in the struggling category, as indicated by the black line that peaks around 50. Again, such a measure is useful as far as it stimulates conversation and prompts congregations to look deeper into themselves and their practices.



Beliefs, Practices, Faith in Action

In providing insights into the spiritual vitality of congregations, RenewalWorks focuses on three key areas: beliefs, practices, and faith in action:

Beliefs

When asked about basic Episcopal beliefs...

- Fifty-seven percent of Episcopal respondents stated that they very strongly believe in the doctrine of the Trinity

- Fifty-six percent very strongly believe that the sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace
- Fifty percent very strongly believe that it is important for people of different faith traditions to be in conversation with each other.
- Forty-eight percent believe we are called by God to move deeper in our faith all the time, thereby making a difference in our world. (This is an interesting statistic: People affirm that they come to church with the specific goal of spiritual growth.)

Practices

When asked about their participation in spiritual practices...

- Seventy-five percent report that they attend Sunday service three to four times per month
- Sixty percent are extremely or very satisfied with the Sunday service's role in supporting their spiritual growth.
- The most common practices for Episcopalians are:
 - Daily prayer for others
 - Daily prayer for guidance
 - Time in solitude

Overall, Episcopalians engage in daily spiritual practices at a much lower rate than people in other denominations. For instance, only 14 percent report they reflect on scripture daily.

With most Episcopalians in the second stage of spiritual growth (growing), the development of personal spiritual practices is key to moving this group forward. Conversations with clergy and parishioners reinforce this finding. Parishioners often do not feel comfortable or equipped to lead peers in prayer at a church gathering (a meeting, study group, meal) or to conduct a Bible reflection without clergy present. Churches report little programming devoted to training for these spiritual practices.

Faith in Action

When asked about how they put faith to work in the world...

- In most denominations, parishioners' interest in putting their faith in action or exploring discipleship comes when they have moved along the spiritual continuum. For Episcopalians, however, serving those in need is an important characteristic embedded in the denominational culture and shows up across all four segments.
- 46 percent of respondents stated that they serve those in need on their own once or more per month. This is higher than the average of all other denominations.
- A growth opportunity for the Episcopal Church: Link parishioners' service in the world to the notion of discipleship and service to God. This differentiates service at church and in Christ's name from service through a local nonprofit, for example. It also has the potential to incorporate spiritual growth into the service opportunity, so that working at a soup kitchen, for example, is nourishing not only for guests who receive a meal but also is spiritually nourishing for those who prepare and serve the meal. One practical way to accomplish this is by offering prayers and/or scripture reflection as parishioners gather for a service opportunity.
- For Episcopalians who are in stages 3 and 4 of the spiritual continuum, spiritual friendships, mentoring, and participation in small groups further their spiritual journeys. These components also will encourage evangelism and tithing.

What do people want from their church?

Strong leadership

Our research indicates several growth opportunities for clergy as they shepherd congregations. Currently, 42 percent of Episcopal respondents have never met with members of the clergy staff individually. Forty-eight percent have never talked with a spiritual mentor. Thirty-one percent have never met with others in the ministry in which they participate with the intention of having spiritual conversations. Churches with a healthy percentage of parishioners in the third and fourth stages of spiritual growth would benefit from provision for these kinds of encounters.

Overall, Episcopalians report satisfaction with the role of the church and clergy in supporting spiritual growth. Of the respondents, 66 percent report attending a church for more than twenty-five years; 54 percent report attending their current church for more than ten years. Yet at the same time, most respondents indicate that they are in the first stages of spiritual growth along the spiritual continuum, despite long tenure in the church. This means that they are looking to the clergy, especially the rector or senior pastor, to guide them. The research offers these insights:

- Episcopalians are highly dependent on the clergy and church activities to move them forward. They need a strong teacher who will motivate, teach, and inspire them. For long-tenured and spiritually young parishioners, the clergy's ability to make the old new again will be important.
- The clergy's ability to teach and focus on basic Episcopal beliefs and practices is key. Growing in understanding of the eucharist, baptism, and/or the creeds are important catalysts for spiritual growth. This behooves clergy to be teachers, exploring basic Episcopal beliefs, both in the context of worship (e.g., an instructed eucharist) and outside the Sunday service (e.g., in church classes).
- A focus on understanding the eucharist is a major driver of movement for Episcopalians in the first stage of spiritual growth.
- Episcopal churches should return to teaching about basic spiritual practices (e.g., types of prayer, solitude, opportunities for guided reflection on scripture to their congregations).
- Respondents consistently report that there is a gap: their satisfaction with the way their church supported spiritual practice was not as high as the importance they felt about the church's ability to support that practice.
- The largest gap between importance and satisfaction had to do with engagement with scripture, with church leaders providing sound doctrine rooted in scripture and the ability to consistently challenge parishioners to engage with scripture in new and interesting ways. Episcopalians believe both are highly important. Respondents are, for the most part, not satisfied with the way those two things are being provided in their churches.
- Until parishioners are comfortable in basic beliefs and value a personal relationship with Christ, an ability to evangelize may be diminished.

Clergy (especially rectors, priests-in-charge and vicars) increasingly report that the stress and reality of their jobs often pull them away from the reason they pursued ordination in the first place. Clergy need to find ways to focus on their own spiritual practices, feeding their own spiritual journey. Wardens and vestry members need to support clergy in this process, allowing time, space, and financial resources for this kind of ongoing spiritual development. Clergy must return to a leadership role that models discipleship and spiritual sustainability.

The spiritual leadership provided by clergy may be the most important factor in the spiritual growth of congregants. That is why the ministry of RenewalWorks is increasingly focused on the heart of the leader, encouraging clergy to deepen their own spiritual lives and answer the call to grow as disciples. They can't give what they don't have themselves.

Clergy are not the only leaders: the role of vestry

In addition, it is vital for clergy and parishioners to recognize that clergy are not the only spiritual leaders in a congregation. Vestry members should be seen as modeling spiritual growth and development as well. Vestry service needs to include spiritual nourishment as part of the experience. While individual vestry members bring specific expertise to the group (e.g., backgrounds in finance, management, building administration, communications), the rector should focus on using the vestry experience to further everyone's spiritual journey much in the way Jesus focused on forming his disciples. This focus will continue to create and empower lay leadership.

Stories from two RenewalWorks churches

We have worked with nearly 200 churches over the last four years. Consider the witness of two of these churches.

St. John's Church, Memphis, Tennessee

After joining forces with RenewalWorks in 2012, Saint John's began a period of transformation. Our renewal is not based in programs or head counts or a desperate race for the cure. We realized that don't need a program but rather a new way of thinking. The church must be a place where people can meet God. So we set ourselves on the pilgrim path of learning, of listening, of moving ourselves into deeper spiritual relationships with God and each other. We stepped into the scripture with the Bible

Challenge and leading biblical scholars. The next year, we adapted the Cursillo weekend into a parish-centered weekend—a nursery for planting new lay leaders and building spiritual friendships. Three years and seven weekends later, this program continues to bring pilgrims into a new orientation toward their faith and to equip the saints for ministry. We returned to the RenewalWorks Spiritual Inventory in 2015, and the results told a story of growth, ownership, and great hunger that propelled us to develop new fellowship and service opportunities that continue today. Our RenewalWorks journey has been one of calm, non-reactive leadership that seeks to empower Christians to take responsibility for their own faith walk, and it has given new birth to the purpose and the identity of these disciples of Christ. We listen carefully to the words of philosopher Meister Eckhart: “What does it avail me that the birth is always happening, if it does not happen to me?”

St. James’ Church, New York City, New York

*It is hard to overstate the impact of RenewalWorks on our life together at St. James’. It has provided clarity and focus for the work of our vestry, clergy, and adult formation. We committed ourselves to buying Bibles for the pews and using them regularly as part of our preaching. We planned our first-ever Parish Weekend Away, taking 120+ parishioners to camp in the Catskills for fun, fellowship, and conversation about the role the Bible plays in our lives. We had a “40 Days of Prayer” blitz that has resulted in ongoing initiatives such as daily Morning Prayer, three weekly sessions of Centering Prayer, and regular “Lord, Teach Us to Pray” workshops. We have clarified our newcomer onramp to help get people moving, from our “meet me at the bell” invitation offered each week to new St. James’ 101 lunches to a covenant of membership we use to help create a deeper sense of ownership. This year, we are focused on scripture, challenging the whole congregation to read *The Path*. It is all very invigorating, and I think its real impact extends far beyond these particular initiatives and into the kinds of conversations we have as staff and lay leaders about our priorities. As we come to year three and consider taking the Spiritual Life Inventory again, we know there is still work to do. Conversations continue about how best to use Episcopal beliefs and practices, and exciting new conversations about pastoring the community in new ways are emerging. I look forward to getting new data, both to see how far we’ve come but more importantly to catch glimpses of where God is calling us to go next.*

What's next?

RenewalWorks continue to engage with congregations in this important work, described by one congregation as “The Great Conversation.” We look for bishops and other leaders to encourage congregations to take part. The work is not easy for clergy and laity, but of the churches that have participated, we receive strong affirmation that the process has been valuable. We hear many expressions of gratitude. We are eager to expand our work to other parts of the Anglican Communion and to other denominations.

We are expanding our efforts to develop an individual inventory, called *RenewalWorks for Me*. This application would enable individuals to take a shorter inventory and receive personalized plans of action based on their position in the spiritual continuum. We think of it as a spiritual fitbit.

We are developing curricula for clergy called *Revive*. It's intended for use with small groups of lay leaders, with a focus on the basics of prayer, scripture and vocation. The hope is that this mentoring will build confidence among lay leaders in their ability to serve as spiritual leaders in their communities. These curricula could be used in advance or as follow-up to the *RenewalWorks* process.

We seek to build a community of Episcopalians, committed to this work of building cultures of discipleship, gathering like-minded leaders for conferences and communicating with them through various vehicles. We will also continue to develop resources, in collaboration with the staff of Forward Movement, to meet the needs of congregations seeking to go deeper in their life with God. We will partner with other like-minded ministries in the Episcopal Church. The spirit is on the move in our denomination, led by a Presiding Bishop who sees the Episcopal Church as a branch of the Jesus Movement.

We will seek funding to continue this donor-based ministry. This is a critical need that determines whether we can move forward. To date, churches pay \$500 to participate in this process, which covers the cost of processing the data. The rest of the RenewalWorks' budget for staff and development of resources has been funded by a small group of committed donors who made a five-year commitment to this work. As that time period comes to an end, we believe we have more work to do, important work for our beloved and occasionally beleaguered denomination. For that reason, we will continue to seek donors who will support this work.

Conclusion

Our research indicates a strong denominational culture, a portrait of churches that have much in common, regardless of size, geography, or theological slant. We believe that this portrait is probably true of other denominations as well. Statistics about decline in membership and giving, about advanced age of parishioners, and shifts in affiliation with mainline churches indicate great challenges.

Transformation is possible, but it will require intention, courage, focus, faith, and a conviction that we can't keep doing what we've been doing.

In all of this work, we are guided by the wisdom of the letter to the Ephesians, with its call to equip saints for ministry, as they experience spiritual growth and a deeper love of God and . Our data indicate that our church faces significant challenges, for sure. It suggests that we cannot keep doing what we've been doing for decades in the Episcopal Church. In many ways, the model is simply not sustainable. Yet with a challenging diagnosis comes a conviction that we are discovering catalysts that promote spiritual growth. That leads us to be hopeful about the pathway forward. We hope you'll join us in this exciting journey, as we build cultures of discipleship in the Episcopal Church by making spiritual growth our priority.

Suggested reading

Footsteps by the Rev. Jay Sidebotham, available through Forward Movement (www.forwardmovement.org)

“[Lessons from Unlikely Sources](#)” by the Rev. Jay Sidebotham, an article published in the *Anglican Theological Review*, available on the RenewalWorks website (www.renewalworks.org) under resources

“[The Questions We Ask](#),” text of a presentation given at the Convention of the Diocese of Washington in 2015, available on the RenewalWorks website (www.renewalworks.org) under resources

Rise by Cally Parkinson, available on Amazon or your local bookstore.

For more information or for questions about this research, feel free to contact the Rev. Jay Sidebotham at <mailto:jsidebotham@renewalworks.org>.