

ST. ALBAN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
RenewalWorks 2021 – Final Report

One of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:35-40)

Background: Where Have We Been?

Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, several St. Alban’s parishioners spoke with the clergy about their individual desires to “go deeper” in their spiritual development. After Fr. Paul sent out a notice to the entire church, around a dozen members attended an initial meeting to explore new ways of meeting their needs. The general sentiment was that the church should offer some sort of expanded resources in spiritual growth for those interested.

The pandemic derailed, at least temporarily, this group’s plans to launch a pilot program. When the church began meeting in person again, clergy and parishioners decided that St. Alban’s should start by taking a broader look at the church’s current spiritual needs and desires.

In June 2021, the Vestry voted to engage in the RenewalWorks process to determine if God may be calling the parish to improve or expand our support for the congregation’s spiritual development. RenewalWorks has worked directly with over a hundred Episcopal congregations in the development of this process, which relies on data generated by each individual parish in comparison with thousands of churches nationwide in the Spiritual Life Inventory.

A committee of 17 people was convened to lead the parish through the RenewalWorks process, which included both a survey component and an in-depth series of organized workshops. During these workshops, committee members discussed church demographics, reviewed survey responses, shared personal experiences, and engaged in spiritual reflection.

Committee members: Donna Archer • Harry Baisden • Monique Clark • Linda Cummings • Fay Froh • Kevin Holland • Debbe Hughes • Remy Jurenas • Peter Larson • Kay Lusk • Chris Martin • Pam Matthes • Fr. Paul Moberly • Elissa Rosasco • Fr. Jeff Shankles • Moira Skinner • Fran Walinsky

Where Are We Now?

The St. Alban's Spiritual Life Inventory (SLI) launched in September and exceeded our goals by garnering a response rate equivalent to 71% of our (pre-pandemic) average Sunday attendance. This affords us very strong confidence in the representation provided by the data.

Our Demographics (from the SLI and other parish and TEC sources):

- 88% of our parishioners are **aged 50 or over**. *In our local community, 32% of the population is 50+.* (The Episcopal norm for this age range is 77%, and the norm for all denominations is 50%.)
- 62% of our parishioners have been attending our church for **10 years or longer**. (The Episcopal norm for this length of tenure is 54%, and the norm for all denominations is 38%.)
- Only 20% of our parishioners have been attending St. Alban's for **5 years or less**. (The Episcopal norm for this length of tenure is 30%, and the norm for all denominations is 45%.)
- 95% of our parishioners indicate that **their race is White**. *In our local community, 44% of the population is White.* (The Episcopal norm is 91%, and the norm for all denominations is 93%.)
- Over the past ten years, the St. Alban's **average Sunday attendance declined 19%**, and the number of **pledging households declined 27%**.

- While attendance and pledges were declining, our **annual plate and pledge income grew by 15%**.

The committee discussed these demographics at length. In terms of age and diversity, our parish is not representative of our neighborhood, and the steady decline in our attendance runs sharply counter to local population growth.

Yet even though trendlines are very concerning for the congregation's future, we clearly begin with a positive baseline. Members of the committee believe that our lengthy average tenure, combined with the growth in individual giving, demonstrate that current parishioners have a strong love for, and commitment to, the St. Alban's community.

Our Spiritual Journey:

The RenewalWorks process breaks the congregation down into four specific categories of spiritual development based on the anonymous responses to the SLI. The four stages have been identified from a review of tens of thousands of individual responses from thousands of churches and represent a continuum of an individual's relationship with God.

Even though there are four stages identified, there is no "end point" to a relationship with God, as it is always dynamic. Movement along the continuum is not generally something that just "happens" with time. Instead, people tend to stay within a certain stage until certain catalysts spur them into deeper stages. While the church can offer support and resources, and encourage discipleship, these are *individual* journeys first and foremost.

- **Exploring** – The people in this group are taking the first small steps in an intentional spiritual journey. (24% of St. Alban's SLI respondents are in this stage, compared to the Episcopal norm of 18%.)
- **Growing** – The people in this group are more committed to their Christian faith, but still have lots of questions. (60% of St. Alban's SLI respondents are in this stage, compared to the Episcopal norm of 53%.)

- **Deepening** – The people in this group have a faith by which they rely on God’s presence and power in their daily lives. (16% of St. Alban’s SLI respondents are in this stage, compared to the Episcopal norm of 24%.)
- **Centered** – For the people in this group, the Christian faith is the most important relationship in their lives. (Less than 1% of St. Alban’s SLI respondents are in this stage, compared to the Episcopal norm of 5%.)

In general, the results for St. Alban’s line up with what the RenewalWorks staff typically find in suburban churches with aging, long-tenured congregations. RenewalWorks refers to this model as an “80/20” church: about 80% of the population is in one of the earlier stages, even though they have been attending the church for a very long time. The RenewalWorks staff find that, in many cases, congregants have never heard their “spiritual journey” discussed as such, and they may find the concept new or unusual.

In their review of this data and their own personal experiences, members of the committee felt that many St. Alban’s parishioners are in fact aware that they are on spiritual journeys but are both *individualistic* in their approach and in need of guidance and encouragement to take the next step.

Our Spiritual Practices & Beliefs:

RenewalWorks measures “spiritual vitality” of a congregation based on three distinct components in the SLI: beliefs, practices, and faith in action.

Like many Episcopal parishioners, **St. Alban’s congregants place a high premium on faith in action.** This is demonstrated in highly active community and outreach ministries, as well as service to the parish itself. (59% of St. Alban’s SLI respondents report serving at church 1-2 times a month or more, slightly exceeding the Episcopal norm; and 29% reported serving people in need through the church, slightly exceeding the norm of *all* denominations.)

However, our respondents do **fall well below the Episcopal norms** in reporting engagement in areas such as Spiritual Friendships, Meaningful Spiritual Conversations, and Helping Others Grow Spiritually.

In terms of agreeing with core Episcopal beliefs, **our congregants fall below the Episcopal norm in every area except one**, which is Grace (“God loves me unconditionally, and nothing I do or have done earns that love”). 36% of St. Alban’s SLI respondents strongly agree that they participate in the Eucharist “to give me strength to persevere in my spiritual life,” and only 18% strongly agree that the “Baptismal Covenant is the central guide for my spiritual life.”

Spiritual practices are how individuals take ownership of their spiritual journey, much like they would for physical well-being. In these areas, **St. Alban’s SLI respondents trended at or just slightly below the Episcopal norm**. For example, 11% of our parishioners report daily Bible reading, while 40% pray for others every day (but only 18% pray daily to confess sins).

There was *one* spiritual practice area in which St. Alban’s exceeded the Episcopal norm: **23% of our congregants reported tithing 10% of their income or more**, compared to 14% of Episcopalians generally. This may have something to do with the increase in pledge income that has accompanied the decline in actual pledging households.

In reviewing the survey responses and their own personal experiences, members of the committee concluded that **many of our parishioners, who tend to view themselves with confidence in their careers and personal lives, may feel less confident in their depth of understanding of the Bible and Christian beliefs**. This lack of confidence can be seen in many congregants’ discomfort with spiritual conversations, leading prayers, and helping each other grow spiritually.

At the same time, there is a deep interest in spiritual practice, especially prayer. We have seen this demonstrated in our active Morning Prayer and Wednesday Compline groups; those congregants who participate in these programs report deep satisfaction with them. But it appears

that many of our congregants, even those with an interest in exploring these practices, are unfamiliar with, and thus uncomfortable with, many of the aspects of those practices.

Our Overall Satisfaction:

Overall, **our parishioners tend to report a high level of satisfaction with the church, its clergy, and our leadership.** (As the RenewalWorks staff pointed out, not all the churches they work with are quite as satisfied with their clergy as we are at St. Alban's!)

As noted above, most of our parishioners are classified in the earlier two stages of the Spiritual Continuum, and most of them report high satisfaction *specifically* with the church's role in their spiritual growth.

This combination of factors – age, tenure, low practices and beliefs, high satisfaction, increased income – may lead to a certain sense of complacency, as the RenewalWorks staff typically find in suburban congregations. Since many parishioners are very happy with their experience at St. Alban's and are satisfied with its leadership (and the institution itself has not experienced any financial hardship), some of them may not feel any pressing need for changes, despite the impending rapid decline suggested by demographics. In fact, some of them might be concerned by the prospect of any change because they fear it might impact their own highly valued experience.

That is why **we should pay special attention to those who express *dissatisfaction* with the church's role in their spiritual growth, which represents 23% of our congregation – a significant minority.** Out of the 37 factors assessed in the SLI, there were five top priority areas identified as highly important to these respondents who were nonetheless dissatisfied with how St. Alban's was addressing them. Those priority areas are:

1. Helps me develop a relationship with Jesus Christ.
2. Challenges me to grow and take next steps spiritually.
3. Provides opportunities to grow spiritually through relationships with others.

4. Provides a clear pathway that helps guide my spiritual growth.
5. Clergy and lay leaders are actively engaged in helping people get started on their spiritual growth.

All five of these priority areas are representative of later-stage thinking on the Spiritual Continuum. In other words, it appears that those who are dissatisfied with the church’s role in their spiritual growth are seeking catalysts and guidance for their spiritual journeys so that they can cultivate deeper relationships with God.

Members of the committee believe that it is possible to provide the support and guidance that these parishioners are seeking, without imposing undue changes on other congregants – and that by doing so, we will help improve the spiritual lives of even those who don’t realize they need or want it. “A rising tide lifts all boats.”

Members of our committee, in reviewing Episcopal beliefs and practices, determined that the questions being asked by St. Alban’s members include:

- How can we live a whole and authentic life based on trust in God?
- Where can we find spiritual friendship and accountability?
- How can we participate with God in our daily lives and relationships?
- How can we integrate Scripture reading and meditation into our lives?

In the end, the RenewalWorks staff evaluation of our SLI results determined that the biggest opportunity areas for St. Alban’s lie in improved *spiritual beliefs and attitudes* and *personal spiritual practices*.

Where Do We Feel Called to Go?

Through its extensive data review, RenewalWorks has identified five best practice principles espoused by all the most spiritually vital congregations, including those Episcopal parishes that are “beating the odds” and growing rather than declining. Those five best practice principles are:

- **The Heart of the Leader** – Not only the clergy but all the lay leaders (Vestry and others) champion spiritual growth as a priority for the parish. Focus on individual transformation, not numbers.
- **Get People Moving** – Ensure that all parish members understand that they are each on a spiritual journey and provide tools and guidance for continuing that journey.
- **Embed the Bible** – In the same way that Scripture is woven through the Book of Common Prayer, weave the Bible through the life of the congregation. Embed the Bible in meetings, service projects, and social events for all groups and ministries of the church, of all ages. (Cited by RenewalWorks as most transformative of the practices.)
- **Create Ownership** – Elevate the expectation that every member will grow in relationship with God and each other through the church, in personal spiritual practice, and in service.
- **Pastor the Community** – Service is often a strength for Episcopal congregations (as it is for St. Alban’s); the growth opportunity is connecting that service to faith and finding ways to deepen faith through that service.

Members of the committee held extensive discussions on these best practice areas in light of St. Alban’s unique characteristics in order to identify the recommendations we make in the next section.

How Will We Get There?

In general, when formulating our recommendations for future action, our committee decided to keep the following principles in mind (and encourage the Vestry to do so when considering implementation):

- We should respect that our parishioners each take something different from their involvement in our church, and many will not respond well if they feel they are being “pushed” into doing something.

- We already offer an extensive number of programs and ministries, some of which may be under-utilized; look at how we can strengthen and/or promote what we have and attract more participation.
- Any new programs should be voluntary and optional, offered as an invitation rather than feeling like a requirement.
- We should support the clergy by *supporting the clergy* – our parish tends to over-rely on clergy for programmatic leadership, and we need to identify, develop, and grow lay spiritual leadership skills.
- Small changes in leadership attitudes and behaviors may have even more impact on spiritual growth than new programs.

Our committee's role is *not* to provide a soup-to-nuts, A-to-Z plan for potential implementation by the Vestry and the parish. Instead, we are offering recommendations for both long- and short-term goals that we think the Vestry should adopt and implement.

At the same time, we know that we need to be more concrete than abstract, and this is the approach we tried to take in our conversations. **We also recognize that the implementation of these recommendations in the near future will depend on the current conditions allowable by the pandemic and any associated health concerns.**

Before listing our specific recommendations, we do want to emphasize that the committee **strongly believes that family and youth ministry must be a priority of the parish going forward.** While this particular focus lies somewhat outside the scope of the RenewalWorks project, we nonetheless spent a great deal of time discussing it, and **we urge the Vestry and clergy to continue efforts to develop and offer programming and formation to children, teens, and specifically families with young children.**

Our Recommendations:

In keeping with the RenewalWorks finding that our best opportunities lie in improved *spiritual beliefs and attitudes* and *personal spiritual practices*, we offer the following recommendations to the Vestry:

1. We are concerned by the low level of strong agreement with core Episcopal beliefs identified by our survey. The lack of an ongoing adult formation program (preceding the pandemic) likely has much to do with this. While recognizing that many of our congregants would resist feeling “forced” to participate in education programs, we feel it is vital that we make adult Christian education a priority offering. To that end we recommend the following:
 - a. that St. Alban’s *re-emphasize voluntary adult formation and education programs, recognizing that, if we choose to follow a traditional Sunday adult forum schedule, then the start times for both of our worship services would need to be adjusted;*
 - b. that St. Alban’s launch *a small group discipleship program* for those interested, as a way to help participants increase their own spiritual depth while also gaining confidence in leading spiritual conversations with other parishioners (including, possibly, the leading of Adult Forum classes and other programs);
 - c. that St. Alban’s expand on the success of our annual Lenten education program by *offering a new program of monthly dinners with guest speakers* to allow the church members to engage with new ideas and spiritual insights.

2. Recognizing that smaller changes in emphasis and/or behavior can drive as much or more transformation than programmatic changes, we recommend the following:
 - a. that we arrange for *specific sharing by laypeople during Sunday services* about their experiences in St. Alban’s ministries and programs (e.g., Morning Prayer, ACCA) and how those programs have impacted their own spiritual growth (similar to the stewardship talks, but more focused and frequent);

- b. that the Vestry encourage ***all committees and ministries of the church to open all meetings and events with both prayer and group reflection on a Biblical passage;***
 - c. that the Vestry encourage all of St. Alban's outreach ministries to ***ensure that those we serve in the community understand not only who we are but why we believe that Jesus called us to serve*** – through appropriate signage, clothing, literature, etc.;
 - d. that St. Alban's ***make a concerted effort to provide accessible education on spiritual beliefs in our worship services, in the newsletter, on its website, and at special events*** – including, for example, explanations of the Eucharist, FAQs on prayer, interviews with lay leaders on specific practices, etc.;
 - e. that St. Alban's ***encourage parishioners to engage in close readings of each week's lectionary selections*** (especially those who are not able to participate in the Tuesday morning bible study), considering such methods as a special email early in the week, online discussion, etc.
3. Key to the success of St. Alban's as an organization and as a catalyst for spiritual development among its congregants is the commitment of the leadership – not only the clergy, but the lay leadership, which includes the Vestry and all of the leaders and active participants of the church's various ministries and programs. (Remember, the Episcopal Church defines all of its lay members as ministers!) To that end, we recommend:
- a. that the Vestry ***encourage its members, when assigned to open a Vestry meeting with reflection, to focus on specific Biblical passages and invite group discussion and reflection,*** as an example of what other church ministries and committees should do;
 - b. that each year St. Alban's ***invite all of the leaders of church ministries, communities and programs to meet with each other and the Vestry*** for a discussion of the roles they each play in the spiritual life of the congregation;
 - c. that ***during all social events and meetings we arrange for a lay leader to open with prayer*** (rather than “default” to asking the clergy to pray);

- d. that the Vestry, while recognizing that the clergy serve as our “Chief Spiritual Officers,” ***create a new coordinating committee to support the clergy in the advancement of the recommendations listed above, and any other similar ones that may arise***, and to maintain accountability for this project by reporting to the Vestry every quarter on its activities. The purpose of this committee is not to create a layer of bureaucracy or oversight but rather to support, encourage, and coordinate.

Conclusion

We believe that St. Alban’s has a vibrant, forward-thinking congregation and that together all of us – lay members, lay leadership, and clergy – can overcome any challenges we might face. **Our community has been blessed with a talented membership that is committed to the success of our parish.** The recommendations outlined above are not monolithic; they are a starting point for a conversation that we believe can lead us to take advantage of new opportunities.

In 1930, the Anglican mystic Evelyn Underhill wrote, “God is the interesting thing about religion, and people are hungry for God.” Nearly 100 years later, much else has changed about our world, but not that.

Almighty and everliving God, source of all wisdom and understanding, be present with us as we consider the renewal and mission of our congregation. Teach us in all things to seek first your honor and glory. Guide us by your Holy Spirit to perceive what is right, and grant us both the courage to pursue it, and the grace to accomplish it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.