

**Summary of Listening Group Sessions  
St. Paul's Memorial Church  
January – February 2012**

**Introduction**

From Sunday, January 29 through Sunday, February 12, nineteen volunteer parish facilitators from St. Paul's conducted 15 Listening Group sessions with parishioners. One hundred twenty-eight parishioners attended the sessions. The goal for each group was presented at the start of each session:

"Our goal is to discern what God is calling us to do next - to determine how we, as individuals and as a congregation, can best use God's gifts at this time and in this place."

Each group discussion was organized around three topics designed to prompt participants to consider St. Paul's now and in the future. The three topics were:

**Topic 1** (5 min): First, write down 1 or 2 times in your life when you have felt most touched by the Holy Spirit.

Discussion (10 min): Second, thinking of those times, what are the values or hopes or ideals that were at the core of those experiences?

**Topic 2** (15 min): "How is or how could St. Paul's be supportive of those values, hopes or ideals?"

**Topic 3** (15 min): "If St. Paul's had been transformed by God, how would you know it had happened? What would you experience; what would St. Paul's be like?" (See Appendix 1: The Listening Group Process.)

This is a summary of the themes that emerged from the Listening Group process as identified by the facilitator leadership team, Doris Greiner and Charles Lancaster. We have organized and lumped participant responses and have tried carefully to make thematic connections. We found themes that might be called goals or visionary themes, representing a desirable characteristic or a future condition; and we also found features that were more properly called key capacities.

We recognize that some parishioner responses may be open to differing interpretation, and we may have stretched at times to make a connection – we hope our stretch will add value to the discernment process. The complete facilitator's notes of participant comments for each session are included in Appendix 2. In addition, Appendix 3 contains the majority of participant comments, organized by theme. Finally, Appendix 4 contains a summary of conversations with church school and youth groups, conducted by Virginia Ritchie. Because they responded to different questions than Listening Group participants, their contributions are unique and should be considered in their entirety.

## Summary Statement

The church is a source of feeling and knowing God's presence in our lives such that strength for living all aspects of our lives is available to all. This is a church in which people are exposed to new ideas, encouraged to question, and are nudged outside their comfort zones, even as traditions are honored, present realities are faced, and attention is given to future potential supports for spiritual growth.

Experiencing God's love in relationships with individuals, in small groups, and in corporate worship was consistently mentioned as important as is our service and outreach to the local and global community.

## The Listening Group Sessions

### Topic 1: Values Hopes and Ideals for St. Paul's

Participant reflections on the values, hopes and ideals at the core of their experiences of the Holy Spirit were often expressed in single words or short phrases.

Acceptance	Love
Ancient liturgy	Loss/aloneness
Awe	Mission
Beauty	Mystery
Belonging	Nature openness
Christ-Centered	Peace
Certainty	Prayer life
Confidence	Presence in the moment
Communion	Push away noise
Doubt	Purpose
Difference	Quiet
Empowerment	Respect
Enlightenment	Reassurance
Energy	Saved
Focus	Spiritual exploration
God's will	Shared
Healing	Shrine Mont
Hope	Support
Head/heart balance	Surprise
Holy Spirit	Transcendence
Knit together	Vibrant theology
Life direction	Vulnerable
Life journey	Wonder

Building on the discussion of the Holy Spirit, participants then addressed in Topic 2, how St. Paul's is supporting the values, hopes and ideals, and in Topic 3, the vision for St. Paul's in a transformed future.

This is the point where the reporting task for this exercise became most complicated. Group processes are not precise and the Listening Group process was no exception: participants offered suggestions and ideas at all points, and responded to self-defined perceived deficiencies. They suggested solutions to problems before defining what the problem is. Some groups described the future of a transformed St. Paul's in limited terms ("more people in the pews"), while others offered specific suggestions for new programs (such as children's church). Your reporters decided that the most profitable way to proceed in light of the variety of responses to Topics 2 and 3 would be to begin to lump the responses into themes rather than struggling to make sense of the responses in terms of current practice vs. vision for the future. We will present the themes we found and related key capacities, illustrating them with comments from participants. Finally, we include a list of specific ideas suggested by group participants.

The **themes** we discerned were:

**Theme 1: Connection – Community**

**Theme 2: Inclusive – Welcoming – Diverse**

**Theme 3: Involved – Engaged – Service to Others**

**Theme 4: Spirit**

The related **key capacities** we found were:

**Communication**

**Intentionality**

**Leadership**

**Theme 1: Connection – Community**

The feeling of being in a connected community was a top value in many groups. People told of their experiences of the Holy Spirit in terms of connection to something larger than the individual – to a worshipping community, to others in need, or to a transcendent spirit. While connection might come through liturgy, music and traditional forms of worship, it could also come through personal spiritual experience, or as part of service to others.

When Listening Group participants spoke about connection, they often spoke of small groups as a means to form lasting links among people. They gave examples of small groups that were both social and spiritual in nature, and often mentioned the benefits of inter-generational groups. In addition, the idea of a connected community was for some an intentional strategy to bring people

together – to introduce one another to those of different backgrounds – and thus was related to the theme of an inclusive and diverse community of congregants.

Another significant thread in these comments focused on communication of events and opportunities to the community of parishioners, and to the general public as well.

Elements of the theme were:

- Past Present and Future are connected and honored in what we do and we serve as a link
- Traditional strength and liturgy that embraces others and new experiences
- All generations and peoples are embraced
- Friendship-food-fellowship
- Intimacy and trust
- Together in times of crisis, tragedy, and life transitions
- Small groups with a focus and a spiritual foundation
- Connected to the world
- Effective communication: E-contact

Significant comments from the Listening Groups include:

Connection (with people, animals, nature); being part of a continuum (over time and through space) within the Anglican tradition (and certain Benedictine practices): being part of something bigger than me/us

Relationships, specifically being with one another and nurturing those relationships in small groups

Connections with other people: through sharing music/singing together; through sharing important life experiences together, even if they may be challenging/tough events.

The Holy Spirit was embodied by so many different people giving support in difficult times, especially in times of crisis. It came in the form of someone who walked the same path, had faced the same circumstance. It is in the people who surround us. Relationships are what matter, regardless of whether they are church related, from lay people in the church or from the clergy.

We take time for being part of the community – a commitment to others – connectedness, perhaps even through e-contact.

**Theme 2: Inclusive – Welcoming – Diverse**

An inclusive community is one that is welcoming to all and, necessarily, will be open to a diverse membership. Listening Group participants mentioned inclusiveness, welcome, and diversity many times, often in differing contexts. For example, “diversity” was an especially pliable term. It was used to refer to racial diversity in the pew, openness to GLBT people, a mix of ages and stages of life, and economic diversity where those of all economic circumstance

would feel comfortable at St. Paul's. Finally, there was an expressed feeling that the community should welcome and include a diversity of thought about and experience of the Holy Spirit.

Participants put a high value on a visible welcoming attitude, especially toward newcomers. Many suggested concentrating on follow-up with newcomers and to families who come to the church for baptism.

Elements of the theme were:

- Respect for differences in age, race, gender, worship, music, and service
- Inclusivity in our welcome to others
- Options in small groups and in worship
- Education, with multiple opportunities available
- Vibrant and relevant Christian Education

Significant comments from the Listening Groups include:

Survival depends on welcome – but also on tradition: passing it on – the core of faith, with openness to new ways of expression

There are many boats to get to the harbor – no one path – we come from different religious backgrounds but can all come together as God would want it  
Welcoming to all – How can we communicate it better?

Examine what being “inclusive” really means (probably means different things to different people)

Move from “inner (intellectual) openness” to “practical openness”: make our openness more visible, obvious (e.g., form a greeting ministry)

### **Theme 3: Involved – Engaged – Service to Others**

Listening Group participants often said that their experience of the Holy Spirit was found in their involvement with helping ministries. Service to others was a means of feeling connection to other parishioners as well as to those aided. St. Paul's works best when providing opportunities for service and enabling parishioners to provide service to a suffering world. Engagement in the world and the community provides an energy and purpose for many. Participants also said that active outreach ministries are attractive to younger people, and make visible our desire to put our faith into action in the world.

There was a call for enabling service through leadership, and through training and support for those engaged in caring ministries. The Stephen ministry program was mentioned in this context as an example of enabling parishioners to serve. Similarly, pilgrimage and service trips were also highlighted as ways that St. Paul's enables service and promotes involvement in the world.

Activism can also come home to our community and to our own building, as exemplified by comments supporting green initiatives.

Listening Group participants sometimes mentioned the need for balance between activity in service and spiritual reflection.

Elements of this theme were:

- Action in the world as a reflection of spirit
- Enabling those who serve is a vital role
- Take risks and be bold
- Balance of action and reflection

Significant comments from the Listening Groups include:

Experience in service to others – not about “me” – seeing the spirit working

Roll up your sleeves opportunities – but also time for contemplation and restoration, which leads to greater energy – service and reflection – balance

Vibrant helping ministries e.g. Stephen ministry – offering support & small group connection

We will come together as a community to support important and deep need ministries (e.g. adopt a school, be key leaders in a soup kitchen or Pacem, be known in the community as the church that takes risks and is courageous)

Get to know people by working with them

Relating to people on the margins creates sense of Holy Spirit, giving up your comfort zone to find more.

#### **Theme 4: Spirit**

The theme we call Spirit embodies comments from participants that emphasized experiences of the Holy Spirit. While these experiences were most often expressed in personal terms and related to experiences in church services, there were also a number of comments stressing experience of the Holy Spirit in service to others (see above.) A key element of the discussion of spirit was openness to differences in approach. Head (intellect) and heart (spirit) were mentioned by participants who valued challenging Christian education programs as well as varied contemplative offerings such as centering prayer and meditation. In this context, participants also mentioned a balance of activity and reflection, just as they did when discussing service to others. Another thread running through this theme was the role of small groups in spiritual formation.

Elements of this theme were:

- Balance of intellect and spirit
- Balance of action and quietness
- Openness to different explorations of spirit
- Variety of church service offerings and music
- Openness to new expressions of spirit in church services
- Creative arts as a gateway to faith

Significant comments from the Listening Groups include:

Balance intellectual concerns or investigations with faith and spiritual pursuits

Variety in service format – openness to different forms of worship

Openness to theological differences: doubt is not discouraged; variety within clergy

Music as an experience of the Holy Spirit – making music together as a source of unity

Art as inspiration – think of a mural in the chapel? Use art/music to engage emotionally

## **Key capacities: Communication, Intentionality, and Leadership**

We have discussed the major themes we found, but within each of those themes there were a number of enabling factors that participants mentioned frequently. We have called these factors “key capacities.” These key capacities were mentioned in more than one theme. For example, participants often commented that effective communication was a requirement for community connectedness, for making diverse elements of the community aware of opportunities, and for expressing openness to new ideas. Similarly, an intentional concentration on welcoming strategies will promote diverse participation in programs; just as intentionally designing and promoting service opportunities to a wider audience will encourage participation and connection.

### Communication

Listening Group participants mentioned communication in a variety of contexts. Some wanted us to be more effective in “telling the story” of St. Paul’s, as a means of attracting newcomers. Others focused on internal communication that would inform the St. Paul’s community about programs and projects. And one comment connected the idea of welcoming communication to newcomers with signs that would direct new people through the building.

Sometimes, we felt that participant comments betrayed a lack of awareness of programs or activities, and therefore represented a breakdown in communication. For example, comments that called for more extensive use of our building during the week seemed unaware of the actual number of groups that use the building.

- Keep our busy community informed
- Employ variety of communication tools
- Awareness of programs will encourage involvement

Participant comments:

Reach out to newcomers outside of Church - Give list of activities/opportunities

What about communication on social networks, a live person answering the telephone/ improved Church telephone reliability?

Lots of activity, but there is a need for better communication about all of the activities

Clear communication helps ease newcomer trepidation (signage?)

### Intentionality

Participants in the Listening Groups often mentioned the need to take intentional action to achieve the positive outcomes represented in the theme discussions. These comments were often linked to specific suggestions for new programs or initiatives. In a sense, participants were suggesting that activities should be carried out with mindfulness of larger issues and goals. There was a clear expression of the need to reach out to people to encourage their involvement. This

behavior is linked to leadership, discussed below, and we have included some of the same participant comments in both sections.

- Act strategically to achieve the change we want
- Challenge people to accept new roles
- Ensure balance in activity and reflection

Participant comments:

Be intentional; in personal connection and outreach

Inclusive: intentionally bringing people together – all backgrounds/ages

You have to invite people in person to help with things – to join in an effort

Being asked to do something, to take part in the life of the church

Experience of being drawn out or nudged to acknowledge and offer one's gifts

### Leadership

As expressed in the Listening groups, leadership is both a dynamic characteristic and a quality to be encouraged in others. Sometimes leaders challenge and promote risk-taking with a new program or initiative. But leadership also includes the notion of encouraging others to take unfamiliar roles and challenge themselves. There was a sense in these comments that the burdens of action should be spread around, and that blessing will come with the challenge.

- Set a clear course into future
- Bold and willing to take risks
- Engage specific talents of lay people
- Support the development of leadership
- Invite people personally to take leadership
- Nudge individuals out of comfort zones

Participant comments:

Leadership in service to others

More lay leadership – nourishing different styles

Look for balance in asking people to do things for the church – pass it around

You have to invite people in person to help with things – to join in an effort

Being asked to do something, to take part in the life of the church

## **IDEAS TO BE CONSIDERED**

Listening Group participants had many specific suggestions and ideas for promoting the church's work and outreach. The following is a list of ideas that were recorded by facilitators.

### **Outreach**

- Analyze how best to nurture and support young families
- Newcomers: Follow up with programs that ensure integration
- Newly baptized: Follow up with families and sponsors
- Programs for men
- Provide support for going out into the world

### **Communication**

- Information about programs within the service, notes in bulletins
- Continuous quality improvement in this area
- Parish newsletter for children, including activity pages and art

### **Students/Youth**

- Compline for students
- Wed night homework space
- Jr. Altar Guild

### **Prayer list**

- More information about how we might be helpful

### **Church Service**

- Increase time in passing peace
- Integrate children
- Reinstate Taize
- Music user friendly/joyful
- Sing as we exit
- Dress up
- Saturday option

### **Pilgrimage opportunities**

Foster creativity in art and music

### **Foyers**

- Cross of Nails Foyers

Transportation to church for those in need and handicapped parking access improvement

More large group events

Care for the building---paint, clean

Single Parish-wide working event annually

Greeters

Vestry at coffee hour with Pictures of Vestry and Clergy Posted

Children

- Preschool

- Children's chapel

- Child friendly pews

- BCP for small kids

- Book for parents

- Newsletter for kids

- Potluck for parents quarterly

Green initiatives

### Special note on Young Families and University students

Listening Group participants had a number of specific suggestions for programs or initiatives directed to attracting and keeping young families and University students involved at St. Paul's. They were possibly prompted by the analysis of recent trends in church attendance that was part of the discernment process. Many of these suggestions could have been lumped under other themes. We set them out here to show the importance that Listening Group participants gave to the topic:

Nurture and provide for young families – analyze how best to do so

University focus: it is a gift of our location and mission

Christian education – appeals to young families

More supportive of young families – how do we follow up on baptism?

How do we follow up on “We will ...” pledge in baptism

There is no intersection between “old people” and young families

“I mentioned my idea that there be a resource, a prayer book for families with young children. This book would include simple prayers and blessings for daily, seasonal and occasional use, maybe some illustrations from children in the parish. Perhaps there can be some ideas for family worship. There are a number of things that can be done. This book could be a gift to each family

when a child is baptized.” (Email from a participant – the complete email is included in Appendix 2 with the report for Feb. 5, 11:30 am from Jonathan Schnyer and Kelli Olson.)

“This group focused almost immediately on St. Paul’s need to reach out to people; first to the young – even pre-schoolers. Reach out to K-12 and to college aged students. At one time relatively recently (2003-04), St. Paul’s had a large group of teenagers involved. That group appears to have sharply declined. Christ Church has a vibrant group of college students. Lots of people become Christians when they are in college. We need to help make that happen by replicating these earlier outreach efforts to them. Do we have enough staff for these groups?

St. Paul’s needs to reach out to young families with or expecting children. The challenge is to somehow engage the two wage earner family with young children who play soccer on Sundays! Catholics go to church on Saturdays; do we need to learn something from them? We need to “network church” with young mothers; we need the core of young mothers to reach out to their contemporaries we had years ago that know how to engage this generation. They need both lay and staff leaders to support them. What about communication on social networks, a live person answering the telephone / improved Church telephone reliability? Could we start a pre-school At St. Paul’s to give young mothers support? One such school started nearly 50 years ago is now a “feeder” of families to that church today.” (Quoted from facilitator summary of WCBR session.)

Much of the younger activity is removed from a large portion of the church because of the success of the 5:30 service

More vigorous student (University & youth) population  
-Integrated populations at all services

Connections with University students; contemplative student service

Engage students outside of Church

More outreach to non-Canterbury university students – more opportunities for involvement

Need to do a better job of drawing in, and meeting needs of, High School kids as well as younger kids (Elementary & Middle School). Creative approaches are key.

## **In Conclusion**

The people who attended the Listening Sessions were attentive listeners, eager to talk, and had a great deal to contribute. They value what we have at St Paul's and want the church to grow ever stronger in the future. It was a joy to work with the group leaders whose strength, spirit, and skill contribute so much to this process of discernment and to the many ministries in which they engage.

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