

Discover and Dream: A Report on the Appreciative Inquiry Conversations at St. John's, October 2-6, 2016

Background

Five years ago, the parishioners of St. John's came together to develop a vision for our parish and some priorities for our future in an initiative called **Moving Forward**. At a symposium held in November 2011, we discussed our hopes and plans for St. John's, and developed a shared vision with eight themes. We then consulted with all of our ministries, as well as individual parish members, about actions we could take to help make this vision a reality. In June 2012, we met again to analyze and prioritize the proposals that had emerged from these consultations. The discussions at this third consultation led to seven action statements. (See Appendix 1 for the eight themes and seven action statements.)

The timing of our vision and planning process dovetailed well with the Diocesan-wide GIFT (Growing in Faith Together) fundraising campaign, which began in the fall of 2012. Parish Council approved a number of important initiatives that would help to realize the action statements and would be facilitated with the money raised by the GIFT campaign. The two largest initiatives supported by GIFT funds to date have been:

- The hiring of John, our Associate Priest, who is providing much-needed assistance to our Rector and the parish leadership team in all our ministries. Leadership funding was ranked at the top of the list when parishioners were surveyed about our GIFT priorities.
- The Open Doors Project, which is helping transform our relationship with the community that surrounds us. At the Moving Forward symposium, our keynote speaker, Tom Ehrich, highlighted our virtual invisibility on Elgin Street at night as a symbol of a lack of connection that all churches need to address.

The Moving Forward/GIFT vision and action plans have been inspiring and productive, but they are now five years old. Recently, Beth and the Making Connections Working Group agreed it is time to initiate a parish-wide review of where we are now and where we would like to be going, as the basis for developing a longer-term plan. It was suggested that the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) model would be a good fit for this parish.

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach that focuses on identifying what is working well, analyzing why it is working well and then doing more of it. The basic tenet of AI is that an organization will grow in whichever direction that people in the organization focus their attention. If all the attention is focused on problems, then identifying problems and dealing with them is what the organization will do best. If all the attention is focused on strengths, however, then identifying strengths and building on those strengths is what the organization will do best. Through our Appreciative Inquiry lens, we consciously seek out that which we want more of, not less—hence what we focus on are the solutions and outcomes we wish to create.

How Does It Work?

There are four stages to the Appreciative Inquiry process:



The conversations described in this report addressed the first two stages of this process:

1. **Discover** the best of what St. John's is; and
2. **Dream** what it could be in 2020.

The findings from these conversations will provide the foundations for the final two stages of Appreciative Inquiry:

3. **Design** a plan that will realize our vision of St. John's in 2020. This task will be undertaken by the Making Connections Working Group, with input from Parish Council, and then submitted to Vestry in February 2017. Following Vestry deliberation and decision, the parish will work together to
4. **Deliver** the results we have agreed upon.

About Our Conversations

Fifty parishioners participated in the Appreciative Inquiry conversations:

- 32 at an after-service session on Sunday October 2,
- 13 at an evening wine-and-cheese reception on Wednesday October 5, and
- 5 at a morning coffee gathering on Thursday October 6.

In addition to these 50 participants, two parishioners who were unable to attend submitted written comments.

There was a good mix of ages, and the length of time participants had been attending St. John's ranged from a few hours (a first-time attendee at the Sunday service) to over 50 years. There was an energy and optimism in our conversations that reflected the positive bias of the AI method, but also a sense that St. John's is in a good place and more than ready to meet the challenges it is facing. There were some differences in emphases (the after-service session focused largely on activities, while the evening session spent more time on spirituality) but overall there was a remarkable consensus on when we are at our best, and where we want to be in 2020.

What We Discovered

We found that the people of St. John's are at their best when they are: being practical, organizing and solving problems; and being creative, nurturing and sharing. Each person described a high-point experience at St. John's when they felt they were part of a successful and effective community; and following from that, when they feel most alive while participating in a church activity. These questions resulted in a list of behaviours and activities that participants feel show St. John's at its best. We have grouped these into five categories, as follows. (There is no ranking of importance implied in the numbering of these five.)

St. John's is at its best:

1. When we are welcoming, inclusive, and making new connections.

Many participants highlighted St. John's history of being welcoming and inclusive, noting particularly the welcome extended to the LGBTQ community, our history of welcoming refugees, our participation in the Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) program, and inviting children to join in communion before that was generally accepted. We also see ourselves at our best in reaching out to connect with our local community. Examples from past years included Kids' Days, which were aimed at neighbourhood children as well as our parish family, and the funeral of Nick Battersby, the victim of a drive-by shooting on Elgin St. in 1994. More recently, the Open Doors Project has been successful in welcoming passersby to come in to our church, connections have been made with local businesses such as The Ministry of Coffee, Perfect Books and Bel Fiore, and ringing our bell has contributed to the excitement of Race Weekend in May. St. John's also welcomes diversity of belief – inviting seekers and doubters to come and explore Christian faith. At the same time, we are not afraid to speak out to the community about our beliefs and values—for example by becoming known as “the church with the sign.”

“When we welcome others warmly, both visitors and fellow parishioners, it suggests we are all brothers and sisters in Christ and love and care for each other.”

2. When we show leadership, take risks and advocate for social justice.

We have always been proud that St. John's is known across the country as “a different kind of church.” Much that makes us different, and shows us at our best, is the result of stepping out of the box and having the courage to take risks. Among the many examples cited by participants were: being the first Ottawa church to install a wheelchair ramp, elevator and hearing loop system; opening the Community Shop in 1967; selling our parking lot to facilitate affordable housing in Somerset Gardens; and taking risks with tradition by inviting children to communion and introducing innovative liturgies. We are also at our best when we advocate for social justice. We were among the first religious organizations to celebrate World AIDS Day; we were an early participant in Pride Day marches; we have taken part in

vigils at the Human Rights monument; and we championed the blessing of same sex unions at the Diocesan and General Synods.

3. When we nourish our community.

Another strong theme in all our AI conversations was that St. John's is an enriching and supportive community. Parishioners deeply value the spiritual, intellectual, cultural and emotional nourishment that our church provides. We are at our best when we nourish spiritual growth through a rich and varied liturgy, challenging preaching and regular retreats. We also value the intellectual stimulation provided by speakers and study groups at which doubts and questions are encouraged. Many mentioned that our music program shows St. John's at its best, and for that reason is an important factor in attracting newcomers. St. John's also excels in providing emotional and practical support for its members. As one person said, "If you need help you get it." "Help" and "care" can mean everything from signing up to provide food for church events, to the Prayer Chain, to regular visits to those who are seriously ill or dying. Finally, many commented that we are at our best when we have fun together – at suppers, hymn sings and celebrations such as Beth's 50th birthday party and Gordon's 25th anniversary as music director.

"I do believe people really care for each other here"

4. When we help others in practical ways.

Providing practical support to our neighbours also shows St. John's at its best. A number of participants cited the Foot Clinic as a service greatly needed and appreciated by older citizens. Others spoke of the Thrift Shop, where the rule of thumb is to err on the side of generosity when serving those with little or no money. St. John's also serves the marginalized by being a supportive host of The Well and a meeting place for CoSA groups. We have supported the Centretown Emergency Food Centre financially since its inception; a number of parishioners volunteer at the Centre, and many more bring food donations to the church each Sunday. Finally, week after week, members of the Refugee Assistance Group provide hands-on assistance in such vital settlement tasks as finding suitable accommodation and furniture, arranging schooling, and navigating the provincial and municipal bureaucracies.

5. When we work together to meet challenges

At St. John's, we are good at rising to challenges small and large. Five years ago, we overcame the challenge of losing our Rector unexpectedly by developing the Moving Forward process. Other

"We are at our best when we help ourselves."

examples of successful teamwork mentioned by participants included the Hearts and Hands Campaign; the work of the Architectural Renewal Committee; the renovations of The Well, the Parish Hall and the Christian Education rooms; and the Open Doors Project. On an ongoing basis, the smooth

functioning of the Building and Stewardship Committees ensures effective stewardship of our physical and financial resources. We are also at our best in having vigorous debates and then coming to a consensus, whether at Parish Council or Vestry.

Our Vision for 2020

After we had finished sharing our thoughts on when St. John's is at its best, we were invited to imagine that it is three years into the future, and St. John's is just as we want it to be. What will have happened, and still be happening, that makes it vibrant and successful? We have grouped and summarized most of these ideas in the same categories as the list of what is best at John's now.

1. We are welcoming, inclusive, and making new connections.

In 2020, our church has become a community hub that is buzzing with activities. In the past three years, we have invited more people in, and go out to the local community more. Through regular and sustained communications in all media, including a new sign with an electronic billboard, people know about us – what we do and what they can join in. Examples of what is happening are:

- The Open Doors program has been expanded to offer a spiritual space and refuge all week. Students are taking advantage of this because they appreciate a reflective space that is not a coffee shop, bar or the university.
- We hold services in the Anglican tradition, as well as non-traditional services and events that are more appealing to the unchurched. Special services include those for young people and seniors. These are coordinated with other churches, offered at different times and not necessarily clergy-led.
- We offer clinics and classes/discussion groups for seniors.
- We host events reaching out to the world and to Ottawa's multicultural and multiracial communities and other faiths, and we have more members who belong to visible minorities.
- The congregation includes lots of families, students, and people in their early-mid 30s.
- We have reinstated the Kids' Fair.
- We have reviewed all our ministries, retired those that are no longer as useful, and started some new ones.
- Art Credo continues to draw visitors into our sacred space.
- We work with local businesses for mutual benefits.

2. We are showing leadership, taking risks and advocating for social justice.

In 2020 our congregation is deeply engaged in issues at the local, national and global levels. We take a leadership role in the Anglican Church, and as the church in the world today, by articulating Gospel values and taking action. Examples of this are:

- We advocate with MPs, MPPs and City Councillors on social justice issues.
- We are deeply knowledgeable about global issues such as refugees, poverty and global warming.
- We are extremely conscious of environmental impacts in our procedures and thinking.
- We have a partnership with an indigenous community to address problems such as the water situation in Northern Ontario reserves.
- We play a lead role in coordinating ministries with other local churches to address the needs of our community.

"St. John's should continue to be one of the Anglican parishes that matters across Canada."

3. We are nourishing our community.

St. John's is even more of an activist church in 2020, but our actions continue to be nourished by the attention we pay to spiritual, intellectual and cultural enrichment and to supporting one another and having fun together. Some of the ways we achieve this are:

- Lots of retreats, for men and women.
- A variety of study and discussion groups to help us grow in our faith and become informed about important issues.
- A vibrant and varied music program.
- A strong pastoral care network.
- Monthly potlucks around themes.
- Church picnics.
- Talent shows with meals – for all ages.

“Our action may have no staying power, unless undergirded by prayer, meditation, common values and the support of the community.”

4. We are helping others in practical ways

In 2020 we continue to have a strong focus on helping others in our local community. We do this through financial and logistical support, as well as by working one-on-one with clients, and we collaborate with other churches to deliver services. Some examples are:

- The Thrift Shop is thriving.
- St. John's is recognized as a centre for refugee assistance – RAG has members from other churches, more parishioners from St. John's are involved, and we support more refugees
- Somerset Gardens still offers condos at affordable rates.
- We still do the Foot Clinic.
- We still support the Centretown Emergency Food Centre.
- We are still active with COSA.
- We are doing a lot for seniors who are isolated or shut in.

5. We are working together to meet challenges

In 2020 St. John's has come a long way since we met to talk about our future late in 2016. The largest challenge we faced then was how we could be financially sustainable and continue to worship and deliver our ministries from our old and expensive-to-maintain building. In 2020, by working together, we have met this challenge and are secure in our building for the foreseeable future. Reliable funding has also made it possible to expand our ministries and hire an Associate Priest on a permanent basis. Elements of this solution included:

- Good communications: talking and listening carefully to each other and our local community, including using facilitated sessions, social media, and surveys.
- Strong entrepreneurial leadership – lay and clerical.
- An effective year-round stewardship program (not focussed on meeting the budget, but on making God the centre of our lives).
- Sharing the church with other faith groups.

“Being open to new ways of using our building to serve the wider community is the only way we can survive as a community and a physical presence at the corner of Elgin and Somerset.”

- Installing A/C in the nave so that it is more attractive for concerts and other events.
- Taking out the pews to make the nave more flexible.
- Commercial partnerships to bring in revenue on a sustained basis.

What's Next?

Discovering and dreaming what our future could be was an inspiring experience. Now we need to build on that energy. Over the coming weeks and months, the Making Connections Working Group will develop a plan to implement the parish's vision for 2020. Not all of the specific proposals generated in our conversations can be included, but our aim is to be faithful to the spirit of what we heard. There was a remarkable consistency in that spirit across the three sessions, and it is equally striking to note the close similarity with the Vision and Action Statements of Moving Forward, included as Appendix 1. The one difference that stands out is that, five years later, we do appear to have a consensus that, in order to preserve it, we must make better use of our building as a revenue-generating space.

In consultation with Parish Council, we will bring to Vestry a three-year implementation plan that we intend to be as productive of results as was the Moving Forward process. If you have any further thoughts on this, please feel free speak to any member of the Making Connections Working Group:

The Reverend Beth Bretzlaff
Brian Cameron
Margot Cameron
Jo Cassie
Detlef Dransch
BGen (Ret'd) The Venerable John Fletcher
Monica Patten
Alexandra Spiess
Wendy Williamson-Scrim

Appendix 1: From the Moving Forward Symposium, 2011

1. Eight themes of a Vision for St. John's

Living the Word

We are a God-centred community, celebrating the divine presence within and among us, and living our faith consistently in all we do. This includes showing compassion for all people, and celebrating our faith in exciting ways in our worship.

Going Inside

We nurture spirituality by offering a wide variety of worship and devotional programs at different times during the week and in different locations. We encourage new forms of worship and devotion, but we also celebrate the strength of our Anglican tradition.

Leadership

Our church demonstrates leadership and courage in our decisions and actions. We are effective by being entrepreneurial and adaptable. Our strength is rooted in shared values and self-awareness.

Going Outside

We are an engaged church, renowned for our social action and prophetic voice. Our work is outcome-based and transformative, and all that we do is rooted in compassion.

All Kinds of People

We are a welcoming and inclusive church, offering hospitality and nurture to people of all ages, ethnicities, abilities and sexual orientations. Our programs are innovative and extend beyond the walls of the church, using small groups when appropriate. They include activities that are appealing to youth and young adults, and adapted to the needs and lifestyles of young families with children.

Community Neighbourhood Involvement

St. John's is a vibrant downtown hub, reaching out to the community with our ministries, and drawing people in with our reputation as a spiritual centre. We are proactive and collaborative in our marketing and outreach to targeted groups.

Sanctuary

We offer a physically and psychologically safe space for all people. We honour a community rule of honest, respectful and compassionate behaviour toward each other, and we provide a mechanism of

truth and reconciliation that allows us to speak truth to each other and share pains and hurts in a safe manner.

Greening (Revitalizing) Sacred Space

We do not yet have a consensus on what we should do with our building. Some are ready to consider the option of letting go of the building, or sharing facilities with other downtown churches. Others believe we should focus on revitalizing our sacred space and finding ways of making our building financially sustainable.

2. Seven Action Statements to Implement our Vision for St. John's

- **Pastoral care and support.** We want to strengthen our network of care and support for all members of our parish community.
- **Welcoming and membership.** We want to reach out to the local community and attract new parishioners, especially the young.
- **Volunteer management.** We want to coordinate the exceptional volunteer work that characterizes St. John's, to ensure that our ministries are effective and that roles are clear.
- **Worship.** We want to explore new ways of enhancing and diversifying worship, including different styles and times.
- **Social justice.** We want to enhance our ministries of service to refugees and the marginalized, and to continue to speak out on social justice issues.
- **Christian education.** We want to expand the opportunities we offer for Christian education and spiritual development for all ages.
- **Financial stability.** We are committed to consolidating our long-term financial stability, given our recurring deficits in recent years.