

***Moving Forward* Symposium: Summary Report**

The St. John's Symposium held on November 18 and 19, 2011 was a central part of the parish's *Moving Forward* initiative. *Moving Forward* has three main goals: to engage the parish in developing a vision and some priorities for our future; to gather information and ideas for the materials we will need as we begin our search for a permanent incumbent; and to offer another step in the journey of building our faith community.

From Friday evening to Saturday afternoon, over 80 Symposium participants shared and debated their hopes and concerns for St. John's, in an atmosphere that was open and welcoming to a wide diversity of views, but also energized by a sense of common purpose. The children of the parish met separately, under Caitlin Beck's guidance, and created a mural, which they later shared with the adults, expressing their own dreams for St. John's.

This report summarizes what we learned about the challenges facing Anglican and Episcopal churches in North America, as well as our responses to these challenges. Most importantly, it describes how we worked to shape our individual hopes and preoccupations into eight pillars of a shared vision for St. John's.¹

The Challenge

After opening worship led by Rob Heard, Monica Patten welcomed participants and described the journey of *Moving Forward* and the purpose of the Symposium. She then introduced the keynote speaker, Tom Ehrich, a priest in the Episcopal Church of the USA, who is a leading thinker on nurturing healthy congregations for the future. While his remarks were based on the experience of the Episcopal Church, the challenges and opportunities he described applied as well to the Anglican Church of Canada, and indeed all mainline churches.

Tom began by describing current trends, most notably 45 years of relentless decline in church membership, participation and givings. Churches have not responded well to this decline. Too many are inward-focussed, Tom said. The contrast that he noticed between the dark doors of St. John's and the bright lights of Elgin St. could be a symbol of all that is wrong with many parishes: they are waiting for people to discover them, rather than inviting them in and going out to meet them where they live. Sunday morning worship does not work for many families, yet few mainline churches offer alternatives to traditional services. Tom stressed that the heart of any vital church is small groups, but he noted that most Anglican and Episcopal churches are not interested. They are clinging to inherited facilities, often at the expense of mission and ministry. Too many parishes are characterized by stale leadership and magical thinking about their membership and

¹ A verbatim report of the Symposium proceedings, including a list of participants and all those who contributed to its planning and implementation, is available on the St. John's web site.

money problems. Many are also deeply divided by conflicts between their priests and lay leaders.

Despite all the bad news, Tom sees many signs of hope and new life. While we may disagree profoundly with their theology, the vitality of the mega-churches shows that there is a deep hunger for meaning. Within mainline churches, there is a growing awareness that changes must occur, and that leadership must pass to the younger generation. Young clergy are bringing skills in modern communications and networking. Parishes are engaging in mission work that addresses troubling social justice issues in the larger community, and there are growing connections with recovery networks and an openness to 12-step spirituality.

The successful church of the future will be multi-channel, offering its services on-site, off-site and online. It will have a strong focus on small groups of 8 to 15 people who meet together at least once a month for activities such as worship, prayer, study or yoga. Entrepreneurial leaders with team-building skills are also essential. Clergy and lay leaders must practice outcome-based decision making: testing new methods, learning from failures, and following best practices of other churches. Tom concluded by stressing the magnitude and immediacy of the changes that are needed. If our churches are to survive and thrive, we must be prepared for “hard times, hard work, hard challenges, and hard promises.”

Our Response

The following morning, under the leadership of Shannon Bagg, we met in small groups, and then in plenary, to discuss our reactions to Tom’s address, and to share our preoccupations about St. John’s. The top issues that emerged from our discussions included:

- *Spirituality.* We want to strengthen our personal connections to God, and ensure that we are a God-centered church, rooted in the conviction that “God is real.”
- *Our building.* We are concerned about the sustainability of our physical plant, given the high maintenance costs and our budget deficits. At the same time, we are aware that it is a well-used space, both for our purposes, and for the surrounding community.
- *Marketing.* We want to make St. John’s and its ministries more visible.
- *Social Justice.* We must maintain St. John’s tradition of inclusion, and our role as a voice for the marginalized. Living the faith means reaching out to serve the community.
- *Small groups.* We need to provide alternative worship opportunities, as well as new ways of coming together in smaller communities of interest.
- *Younger generation.* We want to learn how we can attract the younger generation and bring fresh ideas into our church.
- *New Rector.* We are concerned about the selection process for our new Rector, including the Bishop’s role. How do we get the right person for the job?

The results of the parish survey conducted earlier in November were then presented and discussed. Many people answered the survey questions thoughtfully and at length. Their replies revealed that while we are a relatively homogenous parish with respect to age, income and education, we get a lot of energy from the diversity of our views. An Executive Summary of the survey's findings is also available in the full Symposium proceedings.

We Have a Dream

The culmination of the Symposium was a visioning exercise in which all participants began by identifying one of their hopes and dreams for St. John's and writing them on 5x8 cards. Under the deft guidance of Ken Fisher, we then collaborated to group the cards into eight pillars of our vision for the future. Breaking into eight groups, we then identified four essential components of each pillar, which were shared in plenary.

Many elements of our common vision echo themes that survey respondents identified as important in keeping them connected to the parish, notably inclusiveness and openness, a welcoming feeling, and social outreach. Many of them also engaged with the challenges and opportunities described by Tom Ehrich.

Here is the future we would like to see 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.

Next Steps

Our Symposium ended with a palpable sense of energy and optimism about the future. Tom Ehrich summed up the spirit of the event when he said: "This congregation is primed. Unlike many parishes, you get it; you're ready to go." Our willingness to discuss even the most difficult options, such as giving up the building, is an example of what he called "cloud thinking": permitting ourselves to dream; to experiment instead of trying to control; to be ready for the accidental, the unexpected.

In her concluding remarks, Barbara Dransch used the analogy of a garden: our visioning has planted many seeds; now we must water and tend them, and see which survive. A first step will be to use the self-understanding and hopes expressed in our visioning exercise to help develop the Parish Profile for the selection of our new Rector. Earlier in the Symposium, Barbara clarified the clergy selection process. Despite perceptions to the contrary, our last Rector was not selected by the Bishop, but by us, whereas the two previous incumbents were the Bishop's choice. Barbara cautioned against unrealistic expectations, noting that "A priest is called to join us, not to make us what we want to be."

Follow-up to the Symposium will begin in January 2012.