

State of the Parish Report 2021

[Fr. Andy]

Fifteen years in, you would think that writing a State of the parish Report would be a pretty recognizable and straightforward task. But this is no ordinary year, and this time around, this report has been really difficult to write.

It's been difficult because the metrics we have always used to understand our size, our growth or decline, our members' engagement, all of the metrics we had relied on, are unreliable this year.

In a pre pandemic year, our average Sunday attendance would be about 155. In the months since we have started to gather in person, since Easter Day, our average Sunday attendance is 73. We are running a little under half of what we would have expected two years ago.

It's really hard to know what that means. Have we lost 50% of our community? Are folks out there waiting for the COVID numbers to shift, measuring the risk of attending an indoor gathering, anxiously waiting, longing to come back?

Maybe the people we aren't seeing are participating online. Maybe we should add our online worship viewership to our average Sunday attendance. When we were pre-recording the services we would rack up 150 views by noon on Monday. Now that we are live streaming our 10:30 service, we are lucky to have 20 views by noon on Monday.

It's really hard to know what that means. The prerecorded services were better TV: a camera four feet from the preacher's eyes, no waiting for the reader to walk to the pulpit, seamless transitions, good pacing... Are people not tuning in because the online experience doesn't feel as intimate; because it feels like you are watching something from far away, because it's not good TV?

So, the metrics we have, average Sunday attendance and online viewership, are hard to interpret. It's hard to know what to make of them. And that leaves us without answers to some important questions: how big are we, and more importantly, who is here and what do they, what do we need?

We are in the process of gathering a new set of data, another metric that may help us to answer those questions. In 2018 we had 128 pledges of financial support to the life, work, and ministry of St. Andrew's. In 2019 we had 130 pledges. In 2020 we had 124. For years we have counted between 120 and 130 pledging households amongst our membership.

Then in the 2020 Stewardship Campaign, the number of households pledging for 2021 dropped to 107.

Again, it's hard to know what that meant. Some of the households that didn't pledge for 2021 continued to give as if they had. Others did not. The pandemic has had an economic impact on

almost all of us. Did people not pledge because of the economic uncertainty the pandemic created. Did people not pledge because they had lost their jobs? Did they not pledge because we weren't meeting in person? Did they not pledge because they had drifted away? It's always hard to know. It's even harder when we aren't gathering in person every week, when we don't get the chance to talk in the Narthex or in the Parish Hall and ask how are you doing? Is everything OK? are you still here, plugged in and engaged?

The truth is that we really don't know how big we are, who is still here, what kinds of programming we want and need, and which of our ministries will best serve us now, today. And that makes it really hard to plan for the future. It makes decisions about all aspects of our life together as a community more difficult to answer.

We just don't know. It will take some time to answer those questions. And the answers may change over the next months, or even years, shifting back and forth as we continue to battle the pandemic and to regather as the Body of Christ.

An important consequence of this "cloud of unknowing" relates to staffing here at St. Andrew's.

Our draft 2022 budget, which includes a full time Associate Rector, and assumes an overall 3.5% increase in giving, projects a \$40,000 shortfall.

We have the reserves to cover this shortfall, and were Mother Melesa staying, we would be doing just that. But this moment, as she responds to God's call and becomes the Rector of another parish in this diocese, calls us to stop and take stock. As we learn who we are, how big we are, who is here, and what we want and need; if going forward, we are half the size we were two years ago, it may be that our new reality can't financially support, or realistically call for, the presence of a second full time Priest.

There are other staffing structures that can support our common life, our worship, ministries and programming. In fact, it's more than a little unusual for a parish our size to have two full time clergy on staff. We may, over the next couple of years, need to employ a different mix of gifts, skills and talents, while we work to answer some basic questions about ourselves.

It's important to know that we are not the only ones grappling with this equation right now. Churches all over the country, of all denominations, are working to understand and respond to the needs of smaller congregations. Churches are beginning to do a reset, to think of themselves in new ways, and to explore new and exciting ways of being church together. You all know, I know, and we are here because St. Andrew's is an exceptional community. We still are! But that isn't going to spare us from the work that the whole church is undertaking right now. The good news is, that the things that make us exceptional, will help us as we work through these times and these questions!

Can I get an Amen?

Ok. There's a lot that we don't know as we head into 2022. But there are some things that we do know, and they are all good news!

Our in person attendance is creeping up. We have now broken 80 people between the two services a few times, and on All Saints Sunday, just two weeks ago, we had 96 people in church!

Newcomers continue to come to St. Andrew's each week, and many have stayed.

Our Sunday morning rota, the lists of folks who serve as Greeters and Ushers, as Lectors and Intercessors, as Acolytes and Altar Servers, and as Digital Acolytes up there in the balcony are growing every week.

The Altar Guild is back on the job, caring for our linens and liturgical vessels, preparing the altar for Sunday morning worship.

The Choir is back in full force, and the Bell Choir has returned!

We have a dozen elementary school aged kids, representing nine families, using an at home church school curriculum that we will be able to use once we have transitioned back to in person Sunday School. And we have several moms of preschoolers, toddlers, and infants participating in a book group, supporting one another, and forming community!

The Tuesday Morning Women's Bible Study, the Men's Group Book Club, Ken Stancer's Hymn Study Group, The Wednesday Morning Dawn Patrol Bible Study, and a new Thursday Book Group are all up and thriving!

We have lingered on the front porch all summer, reconnecting, sharing stories, and welcoming new folks (and there have been quite a few new people!), and now, with two large HEPA air filters in the Parish Hall, we are moving that fellowship time inside!

The Outreach Committee is working, at the behest of the Vestry, to identify a black led ministry or organization here in Madison, with whom we can partner to make a significant difference in the racial disparities in Madison and Dane County.

And the Mission Group of the Vestry spent the summer holding listening sessions, working to craft a new mission statement for St. Andrew's that both describes who we are today, our hopes and dreams, and which will help set direction and priorities for the future!

There is a lot that we don't know as we move in to 2022. Each week we learn more about the state of our parish, and how we are emerging from the pandemic. And each week we find there is still much to be hopeful for and excited about. The vitality and strength of the St. Andrew's community continues to be evident, and we have much to be thankful for.

[Mtr. Melesa]

As we, and more frankly in light of my departure, as you, St. Andrew's, continue to walk in this season with so many unknowns, what Fr. Andy just said is going to be key. We have been living in an extended time of unknowns, so we shouldn't be surprised by ourselves or by each other when the desire for the known creeps in.

Liminality - that time of being neither where we were, yet uncertain of where exactly it is that we are going - is not fun for anyone. The temptation will be to find homeostasis - to find a familiar, comfortable, known, steady place where we can predict the outcome. The danger of returning to that place is that when the environment has changed as significantly as our world has these past two years, remaining the same can threaten the wellbeing of the very thing we seek to protect and preserve.

As I prepare to leave St. Andrew's in the month ahead, I want to suggest two postures that I think might serve us, you, in the months and years ahead.

The first, as Fr. Andy already hinted at, is gratitude. There is so much we have to be thankful for in this moment. We are thankful not only for what St. Andrew's has been in the past, but for who we are in this current moment. Look around, take stock of all that is unfolding and taking shape.

There's a subtle, yet substantial shift there. Gratitude that only has feet in the past can quickly give way to anxiety and sentimentality. "Why isn't so-and-so around anymore? Why aren't we doing this ministry that was so vital 2, 10, 25 years ago?" I don't mean to dismiss the value of what is in the past, what St. Andrew's has been. We have to know where we have been, to know where we are going. But, as we look to the year ahead, we must also find a gratitude that is rooted in the present. A gratitude that looks at the people who are currently present, the work that God is currently leading us into.

Which fold into the second posture - curiosity. *What exactly might God be calling us to in this moment?* If you've picked up the hints over the past few years we've had together, you know that I am a fan of the language of invitation. As we take stock of where we have been, as we pay close attention to what is unfolding, shifting, and shaking loose, where do we sense God at work in the midst of it all? Another word we might assign to this posture is discernment. I'm convinced that one of the greatest muscles the Church universal needs to rebuild right now is that of discernment. Careful listening. Attunement to the leadings of the Holy Spirit. Curiosity.

When held together - gratitude for what is in one hand and curiosity in the other - it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, to linger in the anxiety and the past. This is not a season to buckle down and power through, but rather a season to discern.

Facing this time of extended liminality, I've been reminded of the idea that at the heart of our story is a resurrection, not a resuscitation. It's tempting to long for resuscitation and direct all of

our efforts and energy to such a cause - especially in the absence of what was. But God is a God of resurrection, always working to bring about something greater than that which we could have created or imagined ourselves.

We know that time before resurrection is hard - the disciples were afraid and hiding. We know that liminality and a year with more question marks than answers is unsettling. But we have to be sure not to forget that the God who made St. Andrew's what it was in the past, is already walking before us in the future. And is of course present with us now. It's that over the top hymn (370), St. Patrick's Breastplate, where we declare,

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me...

The hymn, as you may recall, begins with the declaration, "I bind unto myself today, the strong name of the Trinity." We bind ourselves to the greatness and faithfulness of God, especially in moments like this. The God who surrounds us - on our left, right, above, below - the God who has walked with us in years past, and the God who goes before us into the unknown. Because regardless of the "state of the parish," the state of God remains steady, secure and faithful. And that can be trusted.

Amen.