

Episcopal Church ABC: Our Spiritual Life

Report to the Vestry

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Background & Approach

- The Vestry unanimously agreed to undertake a Spiritual Life assessment, using the Episcopal Spiritual Life Inventory (ESLI), to more deeply understand the spiritual health and vitality of ABC. This Inventory provides a detailed ABC snapshot, intended as the fact base for a new strategic planning initiative.
- The ESLI is an in-depth assessment of an individual parishioner's spiritual beliefs and practices, including the church's role and support. Those individual findings, anonymously collected, are then aggregated to depict a parish-wide view. Importantly, the ESLI research concludes that churches are healthy and growing when their parishioners are growing spiritually.
- ABC's survey was conducted both on-line and by ballot from August 22 to September 12. In total, 296 parishioners, representing more than 50% of the average weekly attendance, completed the survey. The age and employment profiles mirror ABC's annual pledgers. The responses were collected and presented in the Episcopal Spiritual Life Inventory Report, an extensive and comparative format used by over 1,200 churches reflecting a broad Christian census.
- In addition, past 10 year data was collected on the ABC key indicators, including births, deaths, marriages, attendance and giving. Trend forecasts for community growth patterns were also included.
- Four workshops were conducted during October and November, with 24 representative parish participants, an advisor, and a moderator.

The report on our church's Spiritual Life follows.

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Our Experience as Workshop Participants

- We had a provocative encounter with the vocabulary and spiritual framework of the evangelical tradition. We were awakened to a world we might not be fully aware of.
- We struggled to accept the ABC inventory results. Ultimately, we discovered that evangelical spirituality challenges us--not to practice evangelical spirituality, but to gain more clarity about our own beliefs and practices.
- Once Episcopal Beliefs and Practices were articulated and clarified, we recognized the inventory results reasonably reflect relatively low ABC beliefs and practices.
- We recognized the passion and clarity in the evangelical tradition's focus on spiritual renewal.
- When we express our core Episcopal beliefs and practices, in our own language, we find deep potential to kindle our own passion for living and sharing our faith.

Spiritual Life Conclusions

- As noted in the background, this process started as a straightforward effort to conduct a survey and better inform the planning process. When the findings were shared and discussed, much deeper questions were raised:
 - What do we believe in? What is our language?
 - How much emphasis should we place on spiritual growth?
 - What should we expect of ourselves and what is the role of the church?
- After rigorous examination, we, the Spiritual Life workshop participants, conclude that we have:
 - Rediscovered the Episcopal Church’s and ABC’s primary mission
 - *Be a spiritual community that forms people in faith*
 - Clarified the “Episcopal Beliefs and Practices” in our language
 - *This is our distinguishing heritage and the basis for our expression of Christianity*
 - Provided the basis and direction for the future of our church
 - *If you come here, you will grow*

Inventory Findings—A Content, Complacent Place

Note: Survey findings are based on the aggregate questionnaire results. While there was a wide range of responses to almost every question, most clustered near the averages. In general, there was a high consistency between the expectations, beliefs and practices.

- **Spiritual Vitality:** Based on a composite of spiritual health metrics, ABC scored quite low against all churches in the database.
 - ABC also ranked in the bottom 1/3 of Episcopal Churches (12 in base).
- **Spiritual Profile:** ABC has disproportionate numbers of parishioners in the earlier stages of the spiritual continuum.
 - ABC has a very high percentage of parishioners that are content or growing slowly.
- **Expectations:** Ours are modest, relative to other churches, and not oriented toward personal spiritual growth.
 - Highest are educating our children, compelling worship, incorporates Communion, helps me in in my time of personal need, and helps me feel like I belong.
 - Lowest are accountability, sets clear expectations, empowers me to go out “on my own,” inspires a sense of church ownership, and helps me understand the Bible in depth.
- **Satisfaction:** Majority are satisfied and unlikely to leave.
 - Those dissatisfied want a pathway to growth, compelling worship, and emotional connection and support.
 - Those dissatisfied are more likely to be further along on the spiritual continuum.

Inventory Findings: Downward Trends & Low Practices

- Demography: ABC is an aging congregation, a defining characteristic.
 - Over half of all parishioners are 60 years of age or older.
 - Correlates with a very high church tenure, with 2/3 of parishioners here attending 10+ years
- Participation: All major areas show some degree of decline.
 - Deaths outpace births, marriages have slowed, preschool and Sunday school have had major reductions, small group participation is low relative to other churches.
 - Pledgers are trending down, though amount per pledge is up.
- Beliefs: ABC has low agreement with all the belief statements.
 - To note, this was a significant source of concern and discussion. Several workshop participants and, anecdotally, other respondents felt they could not relate to the “fundamentalist language,” so they could not agree with the specific statements of belief.
 - Ironically, the Episcopal Beliefs articulated later are not essentially dissimilar from those in the survey.
- Practices: ABC is quite low relative to other churches.
 - Bible reading, reflection on scripture, and evangelism are very modest.
 - Prayers of gratitude and for others are above average.
 - Prayer for confession of sins, praising God and response to scripture are well below average
- Serving: Lower than expected through ABC, though relatively stronger outside
 - In general, serving through ABC is very low, while serving those in need is average.
 - Serving those in need, outside of ABC, is above average.

Our Episcopal Beliefs

Note: A clear and complete summary of the Episcopal Beliefs & Practices (EBP) is in the appendix. This is intended to define the basis and sources of the Beliefs.

- The Bible, church tradition, and human reason provide compelling truth about God and creation.
- The Baptismal Covenant and Holy Eucharist serve as the cornerstones of our beliefs and worship.
- The Book of Common Prayer provides comprehensive resources for an individual, family and community life of prayer, in the context of the liturgical year.

Our Episcopal Practices

- Employ freedom and responsibility to discern our path toward deeper relationship with God, other people, the world, and ourselves.
- Seek renewal and sustenance in regular Eucharistic worship, ABC ministries and initiatives, and broader community formation of children and adults.
- Exercise regular/daily disciplines of Bible reading, reflection and prayer.
- Elevate serving, both within and outside of ABC, based on people's gifts, ABC initiatives, and the needs of the community.
- Practice love, justice, and compassion toward those in need.
- ABC will continue to Invite, Nurture and Serve.

Our Purpose

Called to Grow

God is at work transforming our hearts, as we:

- Commit to examine and deepen our relationship with God
- Embrace Jesus, and his teachings and practices, as the supreme example of whole and authentic life
- Passionately express our lives by responding to the Holy Spirit

Our Vision

ABC transforms people spiritually,
to grow in healthy, fruitful, and vital relationship...
to God,
to each other,
to the world,
to themselves

Emerging Implications

“If you come here, you will grow”

- Change: Higher expectations and significant cultural evolution
- Appeal: Demonstrate the fruits of spiritual growth
 - Show engagement, feel passion—case by case, step by step
 - Share the stories of God at work in our lives
 - Learn from Episcopal case studies
- New Platforms: How will we advance spiritual growth?
 - What can we do, right now, to help people in their journeys of faith?
 - How can we build on that as we move into the future?
- Metrics: How will we know individual and corporate progress?
 - Focus the church’s resources on helping people grow closer to God
- Lay Leadership: More and different levels of engagement
 - “Equip the saints for ministry”
 - True catalyst for transition and transformation
- Disciples: We will be role models
 - For each other, our families, our communities, and the world

Next Steps: 8 Questions to be Explored

How are we 'Called to Grow' :

1. In worship?
2. In our ministry to families with young children?
3. In ministry to an aging congregation?
4. As evangelists?
5. In service with time, talent and treasure?
6. Relationally and in community?
7. In our beliefs and practices?
8. In our resources to support and sustain these efforts: our budget, our staff, our facilities?

Thanks!

Thanks

to the 24 workshop participants,
advisor and moderator.

May you have grown closer to God
and each other throughout this
glorious and defining process!

And thanks to the Vestry for sponsoring the ESLI

Appendix

- Episcopal Spiritual Life Inventory (ESLI) findings
 - Defining facts and supporting references from the ESLI report
- Episcopal Beliefs & Practices
 - Compiled by Clarence Langdon
- Reflections on Freedom & Responsibility
 - The four essential questions
- Recommended reading and handouts
 - Shared during the project
- Recap
 - Project process and timetable
- Workshop Participants

Spiritual Growth Snapshot—broader Protestant comparison (norms)

Snapshot:	Total	ABC
Rapid Spiritual Growth	10%	5%
Moderate, not Rapid	28%	18%
Slow but Steady	46%	40%
Content	3%	21%
Stalled	13%	16%

Demography: Age skews significantly older

Age
• 19-29
• 30-39
• 40-49
• 50-59
• 60-69
• 70+

ABC Census: Annual Pledgers
• 1%
• 4%
• 15%
• 27%
• 27%
• 26%
80% over 50
53% over 60