

Executive Summary of the Congregational Assessment Tool (CAT) Results

The Episcopal Church of the Advent Kennett Square, PA February 27, 2022

First, we thank you for your participation in this exercise of discovery and learning. We had excellent participation (186) – representing 131% of our most recent average Sunday attendance; representing almost 100% of our pre-COVID average Sunday attendance. With this questionnaire instrument, the threshold for valid and reliable data is 33%. This response enables us to hear from a broad, representative sample of our congregation. In this assessment we also have some conversation partners. Our responses were compared to (benchmarked against) responses from several hundred congregations that have taken the CAT from across the country over the past 18-22 months. This gives us an actual apples-to-apples comparison and perspective on how we are doing as compared with other churches at this moment in history.

What did we learn?

Our strengths and challenges are revealed and explained through the Performance Dashboard and Performance Indices. You assessed our congregation in the following eight areas:

- **Hospitality**
- **Morale**
- **Conflict Management**
- **Governance**
- **Spiritual Vitality**
- **Readiness for Ministry**
- **Engagement in Education**
- **Worship and Music**

While seven of the eight indices compared less well with other congregations, this is not intended to indicate that these areas of congregational life are lacking. Members do perceive that the congregation is engaged in warm hospitality. Hospitality is a strong characteristic of ours. First and foremost, we report that we are a welcoming community and enriched by those from many different walks of life. We feel our congregation has brought meaning to our lives; that a friendly atmosphere prevails and that we show genuine concern and care for one another in times of need. We simply are not as emphatically enthusiastic about our hospitality as other congregations who have implemented the CAT. This is also true of Readiness for Ministry (how we engage and

support our members in the ministry of this congregation). We recognize that ministry to those in our congregation and to those in the world are very important to our identity as a community of faith. Our results demonstrate that members are positive about all aspects of ministry: identifying their call to ministry; prepared to engage in active ministry; supported in their efforts and have opportunities to serve.

Morale (the persuasive force of engagement of members in the mission of the church) scores demonstrate that a majority of our members are “on the fence” or hold a “wait and see” attitude. In part, this can be attributed to our transition time as well as grieving the loss of our recent former Rector or remaining memories of the issues surrounding a prior Rector. Our spiritual “work” and prayer as a congregation is to remember that we are, indeed, loved by God. That God has provided and will continue to provide the gifts that we need. We are, indeed, enough. What we have is enough to grow and be a vital church.

Conflict Management measures the degree to which members believe that conflict is appropriately managed and, where possible, resolved. A very small percentage of the congregation perceives a disturbing amount of conflict. A large majority affirm our ability to resolve conflict through mutual effort and perceive a healthy tolerance for differing opinions and beliefs. Conflict is an aspect of every relationship including relationships within the church. The constructive use of conflict often leads to better decisions. The level of conflict in a congregation is a reliable predictor of whether a congregation exhibits vitality. Our scores indicate that while there may still be underlying issues, i.e., COVID protocols, or lingering members around our relationship with a prior Rector, we are managing the conflict in ways that the majority of the congregation experience as healthy.

Governance measures the degree to which members believe that the decision-making and processes of the church are open to their concerns. Overall, our scores indicate that the congregation positively perceives Vestry leadership. The perception allows us to use our strong leadership in ways that move the congregation strategically and in creatively re-thinking how we engage the needs of members as well as the needs of those we are trying to reach in our community.

Spiritual Vitality measures the degree to which members believe their faith is central to their lives. This index reveals a strength in our congregation. We strongly affirm our connections with God and the integration of faith in our lives.

Engagement in Education measures the degree to which our congregation understands that Christian formation is a life-long process that prepares us for ministry in the world. Continuing to provide more opportunities for education and formation is a high priority for us. Our results demonstrate that members are motivated and looking for new

opportunities. During this transition time, investing in our faith formation is an important step forward.

Worship/Music are the primary indicators of congregation vitality. While the majority of the congregation experiences our music as outstanding in quality and appropriate in style, the remainder of the worship experience received more mixed reviews. These aspects include the presiding, preaching, pace of the liturgy, ease of participation and panache (aesthetics). These results offer us an opportunity to talk about our worship experiences and where we might focus energy to improve the experience. This is important to us because we want to grow. If we experience poor worship, then visitors and newcomers will also. It is a top driver of satisfaction, meaning that it is an important aspect of our communal well-being requiring creative attention.

What else did we learn?

Our congregation's culture:

- We are somewhat theologically diverse. While theologically progressive, about one-quarter of our congregation is more theologically conservative. Our ability to hold and learn from these different perspectives could be an important strength in attracting new members.
- Our flexibility style registers the degree to which, as a congregation, we are willing to make adjustments or experiment with the ways we go about our ministry to connect with our local context. In this area we demonstrate that we are somewhat settled. It is interesting that the majority of our indicators suggest that we seek renewal, change and growth, and yet are not quite comfortable in making changes to achieve our goals. This is an area that invites thorough conversation. How might we go about renewal as a settled congregation? In incremental ways? How might we experiment with new ways in aspects of our congregational life and learn from those experiments? Research indicates that being adaptable to our context, like any organization, is essential in our ability to grow and thrive as a congregation.
- In correlating Theological perspective and Flexibility, we have learned that we demonstrate a "Paraclete" or "Holy Spirit" culture. Paraclete cultures are intellectually open, warm and reflective. We pay attention to structure and ritual. At its best, a Paraclete culture embraces those with differing theological and spiritual perspectives. Paraclete cultures are often havens for those in need of healing. We are less demanding of a particular understanding of faith, but more clear about the benefits of a particular liturgical tradition. At its worst (when losing sight of mission focus), a Paraclete culture is subject to retreating into cycles of established, well-intentioned, but unfruitful activity. Our culture is an area for further conversation and exploration.

We also learned about our congregation's climate.

Church climate is measured by two questions: One is member Satisfaction (sense of well-being, peace, lack of discord); and the other is Energy (force of engagement in mission). We learned that compared to other congregations like ourselves, Satisfaction and Energy are Average (or typical of most congregations across the U.S.). In both cases, the majority of our members are “on the fence” about Satisfaction and Energy. We are satisfied by some things and dissatisfied by others; we are energized by some things and not by others. Some of this is related to being a church in a clergy transition. It will be important to discuss these matters as a congregation so that we can learn ways to improve both measures over time. These scores indicate that we are both a “recovery/reinvention” church and a “transitional” church. This means that we have a number of strengths as indicated above in the explanation of our Performance Indices, yet have strategic work to do. Recovery churches are those where a combination of factors has led to an erosion of morale. An often-stated goal is to reach new people and to realize that change is imperative. Yet Recovery churches often find it difficult to change familiar patterns, patterns that may be self-defeating. Our work is to communally clarify our mission/purpose, engage in spiritual formation, the equipping of leaders for the 21st century church, and to engage in some short-term experimentation to gain flexibility in the ways that we operate as a church. Our goal: doing the basics of congregational life really well.

In addition, we learned those aspects of our communal life that “drive” our Satisfaction. We learned that we are most satisfied when:

- Among most of our members there is a healthy tolerance of differing opinions and beliefs.
- Worship services are exceptional in quality and spiritual content.
- Persons who serve as leaders in our church are representative of the membership.
- In important decisions in our church, adequate opportunity for consideration of different approaches is usually provided.
- There is no a disturbing amount of conflict.

Our drivers of energy: We are most engaged in the life of the church when:

- The whole spirit of the congregation makes people want to get involved.
- Our church prepares our members for ministry by helping them to discern their gifts
- Our church does a good job helping each member understand that she/he is called to ministry.
- Among most of our members there is a healthy tolerance of differing opinions and beliefs.

We also learned of our overall congregation’s top priorities.

1. Make necessary changes to attract families with children and youth.

2. Develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to reach new people and incorporate them into the life of the church.
3. Develop ministries that work toward healing those broken by life circumstances.
4. Provide more opportunities for Christian education and spiritual formation at every age and stage of life.
5. Create more opportunities for people to form meaningful relationships.
6. Expand outreach ministries that provide direct services to those living on the margins of society.

Of particular interest is the comparative view of top priorities between congregational age groups. Three of the six top priorities are shared across all age groups. This is important. We have distinct unanimity around a particular vision for the future. It is also important to note that our experience of these long months of COVID (as with most congregations across the country) has impacted our “relational fabric.” Our fifth highest priority is to create more opportunities to form meaningful relationships. This tells us that as we are able to gather together again in-person that we will find ways to strengthen the bonds of our relationships. This is important to a Paraclete church such as ours.

In summary we have learned that we are a congregation with considerable gifts and assets – hospitality, governance, ministry, spiritual vitality, readiness for ministry, and inclusiveness. We have a desire for change. And yet, we have some work to do: engagement in learning/formation regarding the characteristics and skills needed in a 21st century church – adaptive leadership and flexibility.

Finally, we are invited to discern what is needed to create stronger communal connection and force of engagement in our mission. In undertaking this important work together, we will do what is necessary to become a healthier and more vibrant congregation for the future. This data clearly helps us identify the characteristics and skills needed in our next Rector. In order to attain for vision for the future (our listed priorities) we must align them with a clergy leader who has a vibrant entrepreneurial spirit, coupled with chaplain skills that will help ease us into new ways of doing things as we grieve the loss of some things that have been familiar/comfortable; a visionary and strategic thinker; and someone who is grounded and will ground us in a deep spiritual life.

Thank you for your participation in this important exercise of self-study and planning for our future. We do look forward to the on-going conversations and work that the CAT results are calling us to.