



**A REPORT TO ST. MARY THE VIRGIN
ABOUT ITS INTERVIEWS ON
CONGREGATIONAL MISSION AND MINISTRY
from
The Congregational Discovery Reading Team
Center for Church Innovation**

How to Use this Report

This report gives the major findings of a self-study by members of the congregation about the character of worship, education, and general involvement of members, as well as the congregation's responses to community and congregational changes. It is based on 19 interviews, gathered in summer and fall 2022, by several members of the congregation.

We believe these findings should be taken seriously even though they are based on information from a moderate number of interviews. Leaders should consider their own reflections and use common sense about the issues raised in this report, building on the strengths of St. Mary the Virgin while addressing problem areas as opportunities for further growth as a congregation.

We believe that both the interviewers and those with whom they talked have the best interests of St. Mary the Virgin at heart and gave information they hope will help the congregation.

Our recommendations are meant as questions, not to tell the congregation what to do. We believe that the insights discovered in these interviews can benefit your future. We also believe the congregation's leadership has the wisdom and ability to best address its own situation.

All of the people who took time to answer these interview questions, and most certainly the Listening Leaders who did so many splendid interviews, should be commended for their willingness to think seriously about your congregation's members' past and present experiences of worship, learning, change, and mission. Such careful and helpful work will be of dramatic value as we all consider what God is up to in the community and what God is calling St. Mary the Virgin to do. As we seek to build on strengths, we remember that God equips us for every good work and that we lead by the grace of God's gifts to us.

Questions asked in all interviews:

1. If you were to describe the SMV congregation to someone new, what would you tell them about how they would be nurtured here?
2. Tell how people participate in the life of this church.
3. Tell a story about how you sense God's presence and activity in this congregation.
4. Tell a memory that gives you anxiety about the future of this congregation. Tell a memory that gives you hope.
5. Tell about the ways people fight in this congregation. Tell about a situation where you and other people were involved in a problem at church and how it was handled.
6. Describe an experience of profound worship you have had.
7. Tell about how you and others feel about the changes in this congregation in the past three to five years.
8. If you were to leave this congregation for five years, without any contact, what would you expect to see when you returned? What would you hope to see

Some common threads across questions

We noticed the continuing impacts of the “events from 5 years ago” on the congregation, given how frequently the interviews referred to these. We acknowledge that there are legal constraints that limit information and discussion of personnel issues, however, there appear to be many lingering hurts, anger, and other feelings that remain related to what happened, communication around the events, and how the transition team interacted with the congregation. The impacts of this are described as having caused people to leave; having fractured the congregation; having harmed relationships between people; and causing anger and distrust.

We are wondering whether these impacts make it difficult for people at SMV to think or hope about the future.

- What might God be up to in bringing to light the current and ongoing impacts of the events of 5 years ago?
- How is SMV doing now? Who can tend to you as you have tended to each other?
- Could SMV find itself in biblical stories of others that have struggled, and how God acted for them and what happened?

The interviewees describe SMV as a caring congregation, as people who respond to and care for each other in their suffering. We are wondering how SMV might use these gifts to create a safe and caring process that might allow people and the congregation to acknowledge these many wounds and feelings and bring them to God.

In addition to the abrupt changes in leadership five years ago as a cause of pain and anxiety, people named other anxieties related to impacts of events beyond the control of the congregation resulting in people leaving the congregation – the pandemic; limitations on gathering; online worship; the high cost of living and housing, especially for families. These themes suggest that some of the anxiety at SMV is feeling helpless, with little sense that God is present and possibly up to something new in shifts, adaptations, and new developments.

We think that these traumatic experiences and rapid changes in leadership may have impacted how SMV's congregation views change, even positive and creative change.

- How might SMV see and name God in change? How might SMV explore what God might be up to within changes that seem chaotic or threatening or beyond control? In terms of creativity? Resiliency? Gifts? Opportunity? Faith? Mission?

Question 1: If you were to describe the SMV congregation to someone new, what would you tell them about how they would be nurtured here?

19 interviews, 53 remarks

(The number after a response indicates how many people mentioned it)

Welcoming (13)
Nurture (9)
Spirit (8)
Intergenerational (4)
Family-focused (3)
You get what you put in (3)
Lack of Diversity (2)
Not aggressive (2)
Outreach (2)
Good worship (2)

Mentioned once each:

Established; spirit-driven; authentic; busy; beautiful.

For your consideration:

Welcome/Welcoming. The question asked folks to describe SMV and share how someone new would be nurtured here. The most common description of SMV was “welcoming.” The responses show that God has gifted SMV with welcome and hospitality.

Intergenerational and Family-focused. SMV is described as a well-established, intergenerational congregation that is also child- and family-focused. People describe the church as having something for all ages and life stages, and specifically, children’s choir, Sunday School, and youth group for young people.

There was a powerful story shared about the unexpected, and important, years-long intergenerational relationship that developed between a family with children and some older members. This happened outside of the formal activities and events of SMV, and it wasn’t organized as a project or mission.

Recommended questions to consider:

1. What does “welcome” look like at SMV; how does it happen; where/when? Rather than leaving whatever is nurturing up to the newcomer, how might SMV develop defined, organized pathways to welcome, connect and nurture new people?
2. SMV is described as not being very diverse – only diverse in age. What are the demographics of the community around SMV? How could SMV assess what it means to be welcomed and nurtured at SMV through the eyes of people who are more diverse ethnically, economically, or in other ways? How could SMV become intentional about becoming a safe and welcoming and inclusive congregation?

3. How might SMV become intentional about fostering connections between generations, which could include children, but also people who do not have children? How could SMV broaden its ideas about intergenerational ministry and look at ways to connect with college students, young and midlife adults? What needs and opportunities might there be in the community?

Question 2: Tell how people participate in the life of this church.

19 interviews, HOW: 75 remarks WHAT: 87 remarks

HOW people participate (75)

There are lots of ways to participate (12)

By participating in choir, music (12)

By attending worship (10)

By being involved in outreach, community service, justice ministry (10)

By volunteering for an activity that contributes to worship (9)

You can plug in, participate, or initiate something as you want to (7)

I was asked/invited (5)

Same core group doing everything; seems like a private club; struggle for volunteers (4)

People are not invited into things very often/seems hard to find volunteers (2)

Mentioned once each: People are willing to volunteer; Covid made people reluctant to be in groups; people want to stay home; Lots of people talk about Sunday school but I don't have children and I'm thinking about adult ministries. I don't know how to define the life of St Mary's right now.

WHAT people participate in (87)

Worship (10)

Choir (10)

Community outreach/Ministries (10)

Sunday School (9)

Youth group (7)

Altar guild (4)

Stephen's ministry (4)

Chalice bearer (3)

Pastoral care (3)

Concert series (3)

Meditation, pledging, reader, retreats, Shrove Tuesday (2)

Mentioned once:

AA, adult education, choral camp, Christian formation, Christmas greens sales, Christmas pageant, eucharistic minister, flowers, food bank, providing food for groups & events, Habitat for Humanity, hiking, liturgy, men's group, migration ministries, one on one conversations with rector, outreach, Raphael House, small group gatherings, social justice ministries, Vestry, Zoom service tech crew.

For your consideration:

Worship was mentioned the most, followed by choir, and doing something that contributes to the worship service. From these responses, we get a sense that people interviewed see worship and music as the life of this church, and that participating in the life of SMV means attending and supporting worship and music. More than one response referred to a robust, or very full, calendar of events and activities. These involve a lot of gathering, and reflect a lot of work by people to plan, organize, host, coordinate, etc.

We noticed that the interviews offered big contrasts when describing how people get connected with a group or activity:

- o People can participate or initiate something—as much or as little as you like (7)
- o I participate because I was asked/I was invited/I was included (5)
- o People are not asked, not recruited, not invited to participate (4)
- o Seems like the same core group of people are doing all the things 4
- o We are struggling to find volunteers, seems like fewer people participating (2)

Recommended questions to consider:

1. The interviews described a robust calendar full of events, activities, worship services, fundraisers, ministries, groups, community outreach, etc. We wondered if the responses reflect the current level of activity at SMV, or are memories of what was happening before the pandemic? How has the pandemic affected the life of SMV? If this is a good reflection ... how is it going? Is this level of activity and need for volunteers sustainable and life-giving for SMV?
2. What adaptations, new ways of worship/fellowship/prayer/outreach/ministry developed during the pandemic? What impact have these had and how might God have been up to something new and unexpected for the life of SMV and the life of the community?
3. How might SMV become more intentional about creating processes that foster connections and allow more people to be invited to participate? How might SMV help new people, especially adults, build relationships and grow in faith?
4. How does SMV help people name and sense God as active and up to something in the life of the church and the community? How might SMV help people connect what happens at church with their lives and God's movement in the world?

Question 3: Tell a story about how you sense God's presence and activity in this congregation.

19 interviews, 38 remarks

Caring for each other (10)

In times of crisis or loss (5)

Support community through social justice work (4)

Through Sunday school teachers (4)

During Sunday school (3)
In music (3)
In worshipping together (3)
Through the youth group (2)

Mentioned once each: Welcoming, rectors, during funeral planning, in nature.

For your consideration:

Most interviewees shared stories where they named God as present in and through the care of others, especially in times of individual crisis and loss. The interviewees shared a strong sense of God's presence when the community of SMV gathers – in worship, in learning, in mission and ministry, and in caring for each other.

Most shared stories of sensing God's presence through experiences connected to SMV. We are curious about the observation that "God is pushing us to get out of our comfort zone and engage in the broader community and its needs." We wonder if sensing God's presence outside SMV, in and through neighbors and strangers, might be something to explore.

Recommended questions:

1. Where might God be present for SMV as a community experiencing loss, grief, and crisis? What is God up to when God is present in crisis, grief, and loss?
2. When it is not a crisis, what does regular or ongoing support look like?
3. How might God be present in and through people and experiences outside of SMV?
4. How could sensing and naming God's presence in the neighbor be something to explore and build on?

Question (4): Tell a memory that gives you anxiety about the future of this congregation. Tell a memory that gives you hope.

19 interviews, 75 remarks

Anxiety

Losing people and not attracting people; that the congregation is shrinking because families can't afford to live in the community, and because people have been leaving for many reasons, including the events of five years ago, the pandemic, rising real estate prices and other costs. (12)

Fallout and lingering impacts from the removal of the rector, multiple staff changes, and the transition processes from five years ago: hurt, embarrassment; distrust; anger related to the transition team, fears about trusting future Rectors, and worries about whether the congregation learned anything. (8)

Questions about SMV's future. Worries that the congregation is too comfortable and that this may prevent SMV from engaging in the community and with new, more diverse people. Concern about being relevant, about connecting and attracting new people. (8)

Mentioned once each: Anxiety: Worried about the need for, and lack of, leadership and participation in social justice; feels like the Church doesn't listen.

Hope

In seeing new people and experiencing new vibrancy in groups and activities. Some new people are adults, some are families with children, some are young adults/college students returning to the church. That there are new people who respond when SMV goes out into the world. (12)

Finding hope in our strengths, such as music, choir, being welcoming, raising and nurturing children and families, skilled leaders and staff, engaged people. (10)

In SMV as a warm, welcoming, caring intergenerational community of faith that has come together and survived challenges. And that SMV seems pretty healthy as a community, despite everything, and that people in the congregation are generous, want to engage with each other and in the community. Hopeful to find ways to get people back together to cultivate community, love and Christ. (9)

Mentioned once each: Hope: Rector supports social justice work.

For your consideration:

We noticed that there are many anxieties about losing people and about not being able to attract people, especially families with children. We also notice hopes growing from the strengths of SMV and from seeing and experiencing new people finding SMV. Some of these are families with children, but others seemed to be adults and college-age or young adults.

We noticed a lot of anxiety about the lingering impacts from the events of five years ago, including the transition team experience, on trust, communication, and relationships.

At the same time, we noticed hope in the stories about SMV as a warm, caring congregation that has many strengths and has come together through many challenges.

Recommended questions:

1. How might SMV help the congregation name anxieties and take steps to address those?
2. What is God up to in the things that people offered as hopeful? How might SMV build on these?
3. There were many good questions that emerged from the interviews, some of which we are paraphrasing here:
 - a. How can SMV thrive? What does thriving mean for SMV as a community of faith within the community where it is located, and what does thriving look like?

- b. How do we attract, retain new people?
 - c. How do we reassert ourselves in people's lives?
 - d. How do we create community and relationships with new people?
 - e. How do we engage more in the community?
4. SMV has been described as comfortable, even wealthy, in these interviews. Some people who were interviewed worried that SMV is too comfortable. How might SMV's financial stability allow the congregation to take risks, do new things, and/or open new ways to see where God is calling SMV to be a blessing to people, the community, other congregations, the larger church?

Question 5: Tell about the ways people fight in this congregation. Tell about a situation where you and other people were involved in a problem at church and how it was handled.

19 interviews, 39 remarks

- Unaware (7)
- Indirectly or avoid (7)
- Address openly (4)
- People leave (2)
- No transparency (2)
- Default to rules and etiquette (2)

Mentioned once: people take sides; nothing happens when you say something; too much time is spent debating things; people like and respect each other here

Name a situation involving a fight:

- The events from five years ago (6)
- Involving decisions about scholarships, donations (2)
- Issue between individuals (2)

Mentioned once: Inappropriate behavior; volunteers.

For your consideration:

The responses to this question reflect a wide range of experiences with conflict at SMV. On the one hand, many interviewees said they were unaware of conflict, and about the same number reported that SMV handles conflict indirectly or avoids it. At the same time, there were many that reported positive, open approaches to dealing with conflict, and SMV, including the observation that people are respectful and like each other at SMV. Rather than offer a singular view of how SMV handles conflict, the contrasts between these experiences reflect the variety of experiences involving conflict and ways the congregation handles conflict over the years.

However, we thought the interviewees shared some valuable observations – paraphrased-- about what might be helpful for SMV in the future:

- When we avoid, ignore, we create more conflict in the process. There are times when people do not feel heard.
- We need a process for people to mediate their disagreements. We do not have one.
- We experience unnecessary conflict around trying new things because there's no process for giving feedback and evaluating.
- Disagreements and conflict have been handled well through dialogue, reflection, discernment, and open forums and listening.

Questions:

1. What are SMV's processes for discussion, for disagreement, and decision-making? How might SMV develop processes and practices to encourage creative disagreement and trying new things? How can leaders and the congregation learn about how to listen authentically to a variety of people and also how to receive feedback?
2. How do SMV leaders communicate with the congregation about issues where conflict is possible?
3. How could SMV leaders—including ordained leaders, professional leaders, the Vestry, committees, and volunteer leaders—receive regular training in skills and processes aimed at handling disagreement and resolving conflict?
4. How could SMV be intentional about creating pathways for mediation or conflict resolution?
5. How does SMV call on prayer, biblical texts, listening, discernment, and other faith resources in times of disagreement and/or conflict? Where is God in conflict?
6. How could SMV be intentional about processes that allow people to try new things but also gather feedback about those new things?
7. How might SMV develop processes engaging multiple and competing ideas about how to spend or distribute financial resources? Do these need to be updated?

Question 6: Describe an experience of profound worship you have had.

19 interviews, 44 remarks

Holy Week services (7)
Conversations with others and rectors (4)
Worship during times of crisis (4)
Through music (4)
During times of quiet/silence (4)

During a retreat or mission trip (3)
Services during COVID lockdown (3)
Support from the congregation (3)
Christmas Eve services (2)
During sermons (2)
In nature (2)

Mentioned once each:

Easter Day service, Doing chores at home, Haven't had a profound experience, When baptized, While reading the Bible alone, During the All Saint's Day service

Intriguing comments, paraphrased:

I want to hear sermons that challenge my faith
The services during COVID, outside, seemed more profound. We took turns reading; we had time in small groups.

For your consideration:

We see that many people have experienced something profound during worship and/or being with others from SMV. Some ed funerals, music, meditation, singing.

Recommended questions to consider:

1. How and where people experience worship that is profound?
2. How might SMV encourage people to expect God's profound presence in worship that is ordinary?
3. How might SMV worship out in the world – in the community – outside the church walls? How could this worship be a profound experience?

Question (7): Tell about how you and others feel about the changes in this congregation in the past three to five years.

19 interviews, 57 remarks

The pandemic/COVID forced change upon us (14)
Change happens to us (11)
We are shrinking/people have left (8)
Good/bad changes are related to change in clergy, music director (6)
Change is sad, hard, and/or scary (5)
I am resistant/I don't like or want change (4)
We endure/weather change (4)
We have not changed much (3)
I don't know (2)
We are bad at it. (2)
I see some value (2)
Change can be exciting (2)

Mentioned once each: We haven't changed (and that is bad); Change is good; It depends on the end result

For your consideration:

While there were many, many comments in earlier questions about the challenges and impacts, some still deeply emotional, related to the leadership upheaval and transitions from five years ago, the responses here focused on the pandemic as the most recent disruption and cause of change.

There was a strong theme related to change as negative, undesirable (29): Change is being forced upon SMV (11); change is hard/resisting/not liking change (9), getting through/enduring change (4), and not changing/returning to normal (3), we are bad at change (2).

This makes us curious about changes that folks described as already happening at SMV before the pandemic and unrelated to the events of 5 years ago.

There were 8 comments that indicated that there are challenging changes to SMV due to losing members, not attracting new members, declines in attendance and pledging, and a congregation that is aging, with fewer children.

Recommended questions to consider:

1. When have changes at SMV generated enthusiasm? Are there times when SMV did adapt to unwanted changes, and was surprisingly stronger or more vibrant as a result? How might these instances help the congregation and leaders see how God is present through change and up to something new that might help with future change?
2. SMV is frequently described throughout the interviews as a warm, caring, connected, and intergenerational congregation. How can SMV see and use the habits and practices that support these qualities to navigate change?
3. There is a yearning for a return to having more children, more families. However, we wonder about the changes in demographics in the congregation and the community. It seems as though SMV members are older, which means the people that most SMV members might encounter in their daily lives may also be older. What might make SMV more attractive to seniors, a fast growing segment of our population?
4. How might SMV pay attention to how people experience music, tradition, liturgy – especially those who are new to Christianity and Episcopalian tradition? How does SMV stay relevant? How does SMV evaluate its worship and music, and work to engage people in fresh ways? How does SMV help people learn about the meaning and practices of worship? How might SMV encourage, support and teach people to tell others about God and about SMV?

Question 8: If you were to leave this congregation for five years, without any contact, what would you expect to see when you returned? What would you hope to see?

19 interviews, 32 remarks

About the same (17)

Fewer people (3)

Don't know (3)

An older congregation (2)

Thriving, many positive changes (2)

Mentioned once each: Wouldn't come back; More online involvement; Less personal; Some new faces; More diversity

Recommended questions to consider:

1. The congregation seems to really cherish and invest in children and families and youth development. How might SMV invite children and young people to share their ideas and hopes for the future? How might SMV engage young people with people of older generations about the future?
2. What is the congregation's vision, hopes for the future? How can leaders and the congregation begin to dream bigger, bring a daring imagination and bold discernment to the future?
3. How might you engage children and young people and new members in helping renew SMV's hopes for where God is leading into the future?
4. What training might help SMV staff and leaders build capacities for leading into the future?
5. How might God be calling SMV to be a blessing for the future of its community, other congregations, and/or the future of the church?