

Vital + Thriving

Distilled Report Summary

The Steering Team has summarized the learnings from the three major products of congregation activities so far in Year One. The three complete reports are also available on St. Mary's website at smvsf.org.

1. The Congregational Timeline Event
2. The Congregational Discovery Report
3. The Data for Discernment Report

[1] THE CONGREGATIONAL TIMELINE EVENT

From the Congregational Timeline Event, summarize the church's history.

1. What patterns, if any, are obvious from looking at our Timeline?

Parishioners consistently value several aspects of St. Mary's life together:

- The sense of community offered by the people of St. Mary's
- The intergenerational welcome, and especially the involvement of children, youth, and families
- Opportunities to serve together in support of the greater community through justice ministries and food ministries
- Music as an integral part of our worship and community life

2. What do our comings and goings look like, across the years? Recently?

Most recently, the combination of the pandemic and the high cost of living have led many parishioners to move away.

Earlier, some parishioners departed from St. Mary's due to the misconduct of our former rector and the approach to the employment termination of some staff members.

3. How does our energy ebb and flow?

Energy ebbs with what is perceived as "negative" change, such as the effects of the pandemic on our ability to worship and gather together, staff misconduct, and staff employment changes perceived by many to have been handled improperly.

Energy flows with what is perceived as "positive" change, such as the arrival of David as our Rector and Kira as our Associate Rector; the return to indoor worship and fellowship; and renewed participation in various ministries, such as justice and food ministries, and Children's and Youth Choirs, Sunday School, and Youth Group.

4. What have been our high points?

Recent high points are:

- Adapting to the continued challenges of the pandemic on our communal life, such as offering outdoor worship in parks led by lay people and Easter 2021 in person in the Courtyard with music and bells.
- Having a full staff of healthy, gifted people who collaborate and complement one another's talents and experiences.

5. What have been our low points?

The lowest point in our recent collective history was the time following the disclosures of our former rector's misconduct that led to the termination of employment and clergy license. The subsequent years with a combination of three, then two clergy sharing the interim rector role provided additional challenges to healing and reconciliation, especially in light of the legal and compassionate need for confidentiality in employment matters. At this time, addressing the employment status of our former music director caused great unrest and distrust, the effects of which linger today.

The pandemic's effects on worship attendance, participation in ministries, and financial giving are a current concern.

6. What do we seem to be focused on?

Despite the challenges that have and continue to face us, there is a great deal of hope and energy about our future based on:

- Competent leadership of rector, new associate rector, music director, children's choir director, Sunday School leaders, Youth Group leaders
- Continued commitment of lay people to leading ministries
- Increased involvement in Children's and Youth Choirs
- Opportunities to serve people in the community
- The Vital + Thriving process as a way to discern together God's promise for us

[2] THE CONGREGATIONAL DISCOVERY REPORT

From the Congregational Discovery report, summarize the inside culture of the congregation.

Interview Report Summaries

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?

Summary of Report: There was a strong theme in the responses that SMV is welcoming, nurturing, and friendly to all ages. The report challenged SMV to consider how it could better organize its welcome of newcomers, and how it could perhaps become more welcoming and nurturing for people who are different from the majority of SMV parishioners.

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

Summary of Report: The thrust of the responses was that people participate in the life of SMV through worship, music, outreach, community service, and volunteering. The report challenged SMV to explore ways actively foster connections, and invite/recruit people to participate in activities. It also encouraged SMV to look at adaptations it made during the COVID pandemic, and to explore whether, through these adaptations, God may have been pointing us towards a new challenge or ministry.

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

Summary of Report: There was a strong theme that people sensed God's presence through the care of others during times of crisis, and through gathering with others from the SMV community. The report wondered how we might feel (or develop) a similar sense of God's presence when it is not a crisis, and through people and experiences outside SMV.

Question 4: Tell a memory that gives you anxiety about the future of this congregation, and tell a memory that gives you hope.

Summary of Report: People reported two main sources of anxiety: (1) the loss of people from the congregation, and (2) the continuing fallout from the removal of a rector and other staff several years ago. People expressed that they are feeling hope based on the church's survival of the COVID crisis and the rector/staff changes, the recent vibrancy of groups and activities, and the return of younger people and new families to the church. The report challenged SMV to evaluate how better to attract and retain new people, how to build on our strengths, and how to engage more in the community.

Question 5: Tell about 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.

Summary of Report: Most people were unaware of fights in the congregation, or reported that fights were generally avoided or addressed indirectly. Many people identified the removal of the rector and other staff as the problem they recalled. The report suggested exploring ways to develop a process for resolving or mediating disagreements in a transparent manner.

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

Summary of Report: People experienced profound worship in a wide variety of ways; there was no common theme or thread. The report suggested exploring ways to worship outside the church, in the community.

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

Summary of Report: People reported that significant changes were forced on us by COVID, that people are leaving (which is a bad kind of change), and the change in general is difficult, undesirable, and scary. Very few people reported change as a good or healthy thing. The report challenged SMV to consider times when change has generated enthusiasm, to evaluate whether its qualities as a warm and nurturing community can be better leveraged to navigate change, and to explore ways to make SMV more attractive to seniors.

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?

Summary of Report: The vast majority of people interviewed expected to find the church the same as it is now. The report asked us to evaluate how we might engage with both younger people (children and young families), as well as with seniors. We should be looking at how to encourage the congregation to dream bigger and bring a daring imagination to its planning for the future.

1. How do people behave with one another?

SMV parishioners are warm, welcoming, and friendly to each other. It is a nurturing environment.

2. How do people inside the congregation view worship?

At SMV, worship is viewed as something best experienced by gathering as a community. People typically participate in worship through attendance at church services (where the music is particularly valued), community service, outreach, and volunteering.

3. How do people inside the congregation view nurture?

SMV parishioners view nurture – in particular, caring for others – as a critical component of their faith and fellowship.

4. How do people inside the congregation view conflict?

SMV parishioners dislike conflict, seek to avoid it, and prefer to address it indirectly.

5. How do people inside the congregation view the future?

With optimism and hope. This is based on (a) the recent arrival of younger people and new families at the church, (b) the current and historic strength of our community, and (c) the lessons learned during the recent challenges of COVID and the removal of a rector. But there is also some anxiety.

6. How do people inside the congregation view the community?

There is no dominant or consistent view of the outside community reflected in the Interview Report.

7. From these views, what do we know about our church?

SMV is a warm and nurturing community of faith that prioritizes church worship, music, and caring for others. SMV is resilient, conflict-avoidant, and – while hopeful about the future – generally content to keep things much as they are now.

[3] THE DATA FOR DISCERNMENT REPORT

From the Data for Discernment report, summarize how the interior of the congregation fits within the exterior community God has placed around it.

1. Who are our neighbors?

Immediate neighbors.

St. Mary's is at the west end of the extensive retail/commercial section of Union Street. It has been pretty upscale in the recent past. Its businesses struggle to survive the pandemic and range from expensive jewelry and designer boutiques to a (non-chain) sub shop. Still a destination shopping area.

Otherwise, St. Mary's is surrounded by single-family housing.

To the south and up the hill, our next door neighbor is a Roman Catholic parish with a largely affluent and influential congregation (Nancy Pelosi is a member). Further up and over the hill is Pacific Heights. To the north and west are the districts of Cow Hollow and the Marina. All of this is largely populated by a mix of older couples, young professionals, and, especially in the Marina, young families—which is atypical for San Francisco overall. Nearby are the Edward II youth facility and Congregation Sherith Israel with whom we have collaborated in ministry in recent years.

The larger neighborhood is the city and county of San Francisco which is, very briefly put, a patchwork of very distinct districts and neighborhoods with distinctive names and unique cultural ethos. Very little of the diversity of the city is reflected in St. Mary's congregation. It will be a challenge and an opportunity for St. Mary's to discern how it can be a neighbor to this larger neighborhood of neighborhoods.

Also in the larger neighborhood are the 12 other Episcopal congregations in the city, each seeking its own preferred and promised future and with whom we could partner in ministry.

2. What changes has our community seen in recent times?

Most obvious are the changes, continuing to unfold, created or accelerated by the COVID pandemic. The emptying of the central business/financial district was dramatic, with lots of ramifications beyond. Of the 20 or so major cities in the U.S., San Francisco is the slowest and lowest to recover. In two years of pandemic, the city lost a greater per cent of its population than any others, contemporarily and historically. The core businesses, high-tech—are laying off employees across the board and have not yet felt the impact of that. The departure of young professionals and young families has been pronounced and has had a major impact on the congregation.

Not so recent but pronounced are the intractable problems of a large population of the unhoused, drug use, street crime, and policy leadership gridlock.

Pre-pandemic, San Francisco was a busy large convention city and a world-renowned destination for tourists. Neither of these activities has recovered.

3. Does the traffic outside our building have anything to do with the traffic inside our building?

Short answer, not much.

Longer answer: Wheeled traffic: St. Mary's sits on two of the busier MUNI bus lines that reach, on one hand across the city to Mission Bay and on the other to and through Chinatown to the south side of the city. Very few St. Mary's congregants come to church and its activities by public transit. There is steady auto traffic on the two streets on either side of St. Mary's. Very few stop nearby. Street parking is very difficult. Off-street parking, very limited.

Foot traffic. Mostly folk in the neighborhood walking dogs or on their way to shop. Some neighbors come by the courtyard during the day. The frescos are mentioned in some tourist literature and at one time (maybe still, don't know) were a stop on a guided neighborhood walking tour.

4. What are the symbols, rituals, and metaphors of our community?

San Francisco is rich in symbols. The bridge and the Transamerica Pyramid, to mention but two. There is a rich mythology about "the city," much of which could be true. There are lots of big public parties. Its patchwork of neighborhoods are culturally diverse and are the basis for a very lively, if exasperating, political life.

A once-well-known newspaper columnist tagged The City as "Baghdad-by-the-Bay." It was meant to connote something exotic, but not too, and enticing. This was all prior to 9/11. All of this was epitomized by a satirizing musical that ran for decades—Beach Blanket Babylon. These details fade and a new dominant metaphor is yet to emerge, but the implications of exotic, exciting, diverse, and, frankly, a little naughty, still persist.

In addition to the big parties, San Francisco has a number of colorful public rituals. To take a walk through a year: The City, as with most municipalities, celebrates a secular Christmas/New Year, both as a boost to retail business, and as a party. Chinese/Lunar New Year is the largest of its kind outside Asia with a world-famous parade. Easter is perhaps uniquely marked by a Hunky Jesus contest, MC's by Peaches Christ. In the immediate neighborhood, the Union Street Merchants Assn. sponsors an Easter Egg street fair which principally impacts St. Mary's by

further limiting parking. And there is a similar weekend-long street fair in June. June is among the first and now among the biggest Pride month culminating in one of the oldest, largest, and best-known parades (in the world). 4th of July means fireworks. In the fall, Fleet Week continues long after this was a major naval port. Hallowe'en, largely because of its embrace by the then still marginalized gay community, is big deal for adults here, more than for children. There is little public acknowledgement of Thanksgiving, other than opening the door to Christmas.

What other rituals? The gala openings of Symphony, Opera, Ballet are outsized for the size of the city. Outdoor concerts—Stern Grove and Golden Gate Park are big events. The annual craziness of the Bay to Breakers footrace is unique. Led by a small sliver of elite runners, followed by costumed and totally un-costumed runners and walkers, doing it just to be doing it.

We are sure we have missed something huge, but that statement alone tells us something about the content of ritual, symbol, and metaphor that put St. Mary's in a very different neighborhood.

5. How do the symbols, rituals, and metaphors of our church relate to those of our community?

There are the most obvious. We celebrate Christmas pretty lavishly, with other special weekends borrowing culturally from Mexico (Guadalupe), Sweden (Sankta Lucia), and marking Epiphany with a child focused mini-pageant. In the immediate community we do a day of caroling on Union Street. We have done Ashes-to-go on Union Street; it does not relate to a ritual or observance in the community. We do a full schedule of Easter services.

David has established a framing of our central Eucharistic Rite as specifically taking God present and active into the community "through our lives."

6. What should we pay attention to as we discern our part of God's mission in and with our community?

While the larger San Francisco community is constantly changing, St. Mary's immediate neighborhood has been pretty stable. Businesses come and go frequently on Union Street, and its 'status' as a shopping destination shifts a bit but that is almost a constant. The population and character of the housed neighborhood on three sides of us has been the same for a generation or more and shows no indications of that changing.

The big question is, who is the neighbor to whom it is our mission to serve so that the reign of God can come near(er)? St. Mary's has a modest history of reaching beyond, at least from the time Bill Barcus led the congregation into the founding activities of what became Episcopal Community Services. Recent initiatives in food distribution, refugee settlement, immigrant accompaniment, youth services (Edward II), links to Faith in Action, etc. energize congregants,

live out the Good News in impressive, concrete ways, and do not occur in, for, or with our immediate neighborhood.

Ancillary question: Is St. Mary's a neighborhood church or a destination church? The answer to that question affects how we think about who, how, where, and why we serve.

We need a careful conversation about the link and motivation between mission and evangelism. Example: it is becoming more conscious and intentional in The Episcopal Church that either survival or active mission and ministry depends on being active and noticed in the "community." It is the path to future stability, if not growth, and incidentally what Jesus meant as discipleship for us. So are we on the path to fix the old, or the path to the new?

Given both what is "wrong" with San Francisco, and what is changing, what potential gifts of service and connection does the congregation of St. Mary's have to offer?