

Green shoots': Community outreach fuels thriving congregations

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Palm Sunday celebration at Church of the Redeemer in Toronto. Photo: Thomas Evers
Newly released statistics showing that the church's membership has continued to fall since 2001 have drawn new attention to the outliers of this trend—parishes and congregations

across the country that are thriving. At this fall's meeting of the House of Bishops, after the bishops had received a report on the statistics, Archbishop Linda Nicholls, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, asked them to ponder "the 'green shoots' that we need to nurture." The call was taken up at the November meeting of the Council of General Synod (CoGS), which saw CoGS members gather in groups to discuss the healthy congregations in their areas, and identify the factors they had in common.

The Anglican Journal spoke to five thriving churches, some of which were even facing closure before managing to turn things around. While each had unique elements that have helped fuel their growth, a shared feature in all five parishes or congregations was ministry focused on outreach to the local community.

Parish of Salisbury and Havelock, diocese of Fredericton New Brunswick

In the rural parish of Salisbury and Havelock, three of four Anglican churches were no longer in use at the time the Rev. Chris Hayes arrived as the parish's new rector in 2012. The closed churches included St. Paul's in Havelock, St. Peter's in River Glade and St. Andrew in Petitcodiac, the latter of which had closed down earlier that year.



St. John's Anglican Church in Salisbury,

N.B. Photo: Contributed

After six months of low attendance at the only church that remained open, St. John's in Salisbury, Hayes asked the vestry if it could re-open St. Andrew so that the parish had churches in the two largest villages within it (Petitcodiac and Salisbury have populations of 1,400 and 2,400, respectively). Though initially reluctant due to the high expense of running both buildings, they soon acquiesced.

Immediately after the parish re-opened St. Andrew, some people who had stopped attending church in the parish returned. The "novelty factor" of a new priest in the area also brought more people out, Hayes says. At the time of the re-opening, his wife Christine suggested starting a play group for parents and caregivers of young children.

"That was one of the first things we did outside of worship services, and that was met with some great response," Hayes says. He calls this period a "formative time" for the parish, establishing its new focus on "reaching out to serve the needs of the public rather than just try to get the public to come to them.



School dance hosted by the Parish of

Salisbury and Havelock. Photo: Contributed

"Since then, I've been trying to teach this great emphasis on mission for the kingdom as opposed to mission for the empty pews," Hayes adds. "I think we're getting it now. Most of...the things that came across our collective desk are things around serving the needs of the community, rather than trying to simply boost attendance or increase the bank account."

A major initiative on this front was the construction of a playground on the large piece of land in front of St. Andrew. The parish received grants from the diocese and the New Brunswick Children's Foundation, a local charity, to fund the project, which brought more local residents to the church.



Children hear a Godly Play story during a summer event. Photo: Contributed

A flurry of other outreach programs have increased ties between the parish and the community. These include visits to seniors' homes, vacation Bible school and a breakfast program for elementary schoolchildren. St. Andrew itself hosts preschool and play groups for children, yoga, soap-making classes, community craft sales and other activities.

One of its most prominent activities is hosting elementary school dances.

Hayes likes to tell the story of a father who was picking his children up from the dance one night and asked him why the church was hosting the dance. When Hayes explained the parish's efforts to reach out to the community, the parent responded, "Any church that's willing to put on a dance for the sake of the kids is a church I'd like to get my kids baptized in."

St. Stephen's Anglican Church, diocese of Saskatoon Saskatchewan

St. Stephen's Anglican Church describes itself as seeking "to be a Christ-centred, Holy Spirit-led, outward focussed, caring community." The church hosts a diverse range of groups, including a bridge club, English learning class, Alcoholics Anonymous, a cooking

group, residents of local seniors' homes and a youth group—the latter of which includes both young Anglicans and those with no connection to the parish.

St. Stephen's also recently started celebrating the Eucharist forward from the altar—the step of which previously posed a potential tripping hazard for older members of the congregation—and changed the format of vestry meetings to include Bible study.

“Instead of coming together and discussing the sometimes mundane business of vestry...we actually have Bible study before we have the meeting,” rector's warden Chris Wood says. “If we have the meeting, great, and if we don't, we don't. But it's more about the Bible study.”

Since then, the number of people wanting to be on vestry has jumped from 8 to about 15. “People are being energized by just a different way of interpreting how things should be done,” Wood says.

Outreach to the community, he says, has helped lead to growth for the parish. Wood estimates that between 2016 and 2019, the number of families attending worship in the parish rose from 100 to 120.

“I think it's being...a place that lets them know that the church is there, that the church is...a presence to the neighbourhood, and just allowing the doors to be open and allowing groups to come in,” he says.

St. Jax Montréal, diocese of Montreal Quebec

St. Jax Montréal is a church plant launched in 2016 at the site of the historic St. James the Apostle Church. Prior to the launch, St. James was faced with negative cash flow, expensive buildings, a lack of new members and no clear plan for growth, says the Rev. Graham Singh, the parish's current incumbent.



Informal small group discussions are a

major part of worship at St. Jax. Photo: Thilbault Carron

Singh first proposed the idea of a new church plant to the diocese of Montreal. What eventually evolved into St. Jax was based on the model of Singh's own former congregation of Holy Trinity Brompton in London, England.

The diocese dissolved the parish of St. James and took over direct control of the congregation. It provided a pastoral care plan for the 30-40 remaining members of the congregation that saw most transfer to two other churches, St. George's or St. Matthias—though some chose to remain at the new St. Jax.

During his tenure as incumbent, Singh says, St. Jax has seen a rise in attendance to the point where about 250 people now call it their church home. Singh describes St. Jax as “a multigenerational, multi-ethnic, multi-confessional congregation,” with many Chinese members as well as members from Iran, Lebanon, Africa and the Indian subcontinent. It is also multi-lingual: clergy at St. Jax on Sundays offer greetings in English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin Chinese.

Singh says the growth of the church is based primarily around a “participative form of worship.”



Craft-making activity at St. Jax. Photo: Courtesy of St.

Jax

“To an outside traditional Anglican observer, it would look a heck of a lot like a community church,” he says. “It would look less like a traditional Anglican church. What that means is we focus on things like Alpha courses, marriage courses, informal worship. We don’t celebrate the Eucharist every week. We have time for small groups, and we try to make that as participative a form of worship as we can.”

The Alpha course is a vital element to ministry at St. Jax. Singh believes that catechism is a necessary foundation for church growth. He describes the Alpha course as one of the most widely used catechisms around the world, highly regarded by multiple denominations and teaching people the basics of Christian belief over a 10-week period.

“The church always...had catechism in Sunday schools, at times when Christendom meant that that’s how you began your journey of faith,” Singh says.

In 2019, however, “an entry to catechism is by no means assumed. So we need to start with an environment where adults with a choice about their faith can ask questions. To me, that is the key to church growth.”

St. Jax also has a thriving children's and youth program primarily led by university students. "The idea of starting a new church tends to attract younger people," Singh says.

A different area of growth for St. Jax has been sharing its space with other non-profits and charities in the area. Many such organizations are being priced out of Canadian cities and cannot afford to rent facilities, Singh says. Meanwhile, many church buildings are sitting empty.



Musicians perform during a charity

auction at St. Jax. Photo: Courtesy of St. Jax

Sharing that space with non-profits and charities allows the church to participate in the "sharing economy" in a way Singh compares to online lodging broker Airbnb, while also enhancing ties between the church and other organizations. St. Jax now pulls in \$200,000 in revenue each year by renting out its space to more than 70 groups or organizations, including non-profit circus company Le Monastère, refugee charity Action Réfugiés Montréal and a municipal concert series.

Singh believes that the Anglican Church of Canada must respond to declining membership by being open to radical change. As executive director of the Trinity Centres Foundation, which works to transform churches into community hubs, he seeks to help other churches follow a model similar to St. Jax's and find new sources of funding.

"What we can do from the national discussion [on church decline] is prepare the ground to say, 'Yes, indeed, we really do need these kind of radical solutions. So let's hear what they are,'" he says. "And then not be surprised when we say, 'Boy, that's radical.'"

Church of the Redeemer, diocese of Toronto Ontario

In Toronto, extensive growth has been seen at the Church of the Redeemer—a change witnessed first-hand by incumbent Canon Steven Mackison, who first served there 20 years ago as associate priest and priest-in-charge before returning in August 2019.



Kids learn about horticulture during a summer activity. Photo: Church of the Redeemer

During the 1970s, Church of the Redeemer suffered from falling attendance and financial difficulties. Then-Toronto bishop Lewis Garnsworthy wanted to close the building, but a group of 10 women in the congregation appealed to him and led efforts to revitalize the church.

Church lands were sold to developers, which allowed the congregation to regain control of its finances. The church engaged in a number of building projects, including a facility for its outreach ministry to the homeless, The Common Table.



Anglicans at Church of the Redeemer carry

banners to mark the Season of Creation. Photo: Thomas Evers

The congregation's overall trajectory has been one of success. On a typical Sunday, Church of the Redeemer now sees 400 people attend over the course of four services, up from 300 two decades ago. These include three morning services and an evening service that can take different forms—from traditional Anglican evensong to Bach vespers to its monthly “rock Eucharist,” in which the church weaves music from contemporary artists into the liturgy.

In explaining why Redeemer has thrived, Mackison recalls a quote from Protestant theologian Frederick Buechner: “Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need.” He believes that the broad ministry at Church of the Redeemer accounts for much of its growth.

Its most recognizable outreach ministry, The Common Table, serves 100 meals a day to the homeless and working poor from Monday to Friday, as well as offering psychiatric care, medical care from a parish nurse, referrals and other services. University of Toronto

students staff and volunteer the outreach program, while the church attracts other students from two local Anglican colleges, Trinity and Wycliffe.



Rainbow decorations for Toronto Pride. Photo:

Church of the Redeemer

Church of the Redeemer has sponsored 11 refugees in the past four years through its refugee resettlement program. It has working groups devoted to Indigenous solidarity and the care of creation. And it is highly supportive of the struggle for justice and acceptance by the LGBTQ+ community, participating enthusiastically in the annual Pride parade.

“All these are sort of emblematic of what I think is responsible for the church’s growth,” Mackison says. “And that...really is responding to the Holy Spirit in our midst, leading us into deeper and deeper truth in each generation by addressing what the immediate needs of the community and the world are and responding to them as Christians.”

St. Luke’s Anglican Church, diocese of Fredericton New Brunswick

Less than five years ago, St. Luke’s Anglican Church, in Saint John, N.B., was on the brink of being shut down. The church had fallen on hard times. An “urban renewal” project by the city had led to the disappearance of much of the surrounding neighbourhood, leaving an economically depressed area in its wake.

By 2015, only 45 people attended services on a typical Sunday. Heating expenses for the building—a massive structure, built in 1876, that seats up to 800 people—totalled about

\$20,000 each winter. “That’s a big hit when your Sunday income hovers around \$2,500,” says interim priest-in-charge Canon David Barrett, who began ministry at St. Luke’s in 2016. A developer expressed interest in buying the property and tearing down the church, though that deal fell through.

What kept the church going, Barrett says, was its active outreach program. With the help of a part-time outreach worker, the church provides hot lunches on Mondays and Thursdays and hot breakfasts on Tuesdays, coordinating with a local Baptist church that provides meals every weekday. An estimated 65-70 people come out to St. Luke’s for these meals.

St. Luke’s also offers free clothing to whoever needs it. It provides free haircuts once or twice a month and foot care provided by a local volunteer. Every Christmas, the church hosts a Christmas dinner for 50 families.



As part of its outreach program, St. Luke’s offers two hot lunches and a hot breakfast each week. Photo: Contributed

The turnaround for St. Luke’s, Barrett says, began with the appointment of a full-time priest-in-charge. The filling of this previously vacant position, he suggests, provided some

stability for the parish and a sense among some congregation members that the church would not be closing after all.

Another stabilizing factor was a \$60,000 grant from the diocese to install heat pumps, which significantly reduced the cost of heating and further reassured people. The diocese provided funds to hire a young, full-time assistant curate, Cole Hartin [see Hartin's reflection on p. 20 of this issue], who is active in the community and has provided another boost for the church. "People have really responded to him being there," Barrett says.

Finally, attendance at St. Luke's has increased due to a number of families from India, largely of Orthodox backgrounds, who moved to Saint John and gravitated towards the congregation. About a dozen Indian families now worship at St. Luke's and their ranks include a warden and members of the vestry, he says.

Today, 100 people attend St. Luke's on Sundays. Barrett hopes to increase that to 120 next year. Increased attendance and fundraisers enabled the church to pay off its five-year loan from the diocese in two years.

Barrett points to outreach as a major factor in the church's revitalization. Local residents, he said, "see what a great benefit it is to the people of Saint John, so people have really rallied behind that to keep it going and contribute to it, both with their time and their financial resources."

The outreach program, he adds, has drawn people "because they see we're a church who's doing something for the community. We're not spending all of our time wondering, 'How are we going to keep our building open?' We're not focusing on ourselves. I think that's the answer."

Is your parish growing? The Anglican Journal may feature it in an upcoming story. Contact Matthew Townsend, editorial supervisor, at: 416-924-9192, ext. 207 or mtownsend@national.anglican.ca.

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