Anglican Diocese of Edmonton

Listening in Spirit | Shaping Our Future Together

Phase 1 Final Report

The Holy Spirit of God at Work in the Diocese of Edmonton

Executive Council Report **September 26, 2024**	**Presented by Anna Bubel** **Another Way**	**azbubel@telus.net**

Together on the Way
Luke 24:13-35

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Listening in Spirit: Executive Summary

In 2023, the Anglican Diocese of Edmonton (Diocese) committed to developing an action-oriented strategic plan that would inform decision-making, resource allocation, and ministry/service focus over the next five years. The following year, the Diocese hired Anna Bubel, of *Another Way*, to generate a comprehensive understanding of the current state of the Diocese.

Data was collected using several methods: reviews of existing Synod Office records, surveys of members and clergy/lay leaders, in person parish meetings, and interviews with key informants. While participation rates varied, 45 of 46 parishes participated in at least two or more of the research methods. The subsequent data represents both a longer-term view (2017 – 2023 financial and membership records) and a snapshot in time (qualitative assessments in the summer of 2024). The results were summarised and shared with parishes for their approval as "faithful reflections" of the opinions shared. Parish summaries, along with the Synod leadership team analysis, are found in the appendices.

The Diocese (the collection of parishes, not the Synod leadership team) is characterised by the following facts that provide context and a baseline for future decision-making.

- Two-thirds of all parishes are found in the larger census metropolitan area of Edmonton. Small and large towns represent one-third of all parishes. Areas outside the broader Edmonton region are expected to experience either no growth, or an absolute decline in population by 2025.
- In 2023, on average per parish, 52 people (online and in person) attended Sunday services. This is a decline of 14 percent since 2017. One-third of parishes have less than 25 members attending Sunday service.
- The average number of children attending Sunday school has declined substantially with 42 percent fewer children in 2023 than in 2017.
- While 85 percent of all parishes have either full or part-time priests, only 40 percent of parishes have a paid full-time priest.
- Ninety lay leaders formally contribute to the Diocese - an average of two per parish.
- The 2023 insurance replacement value of all physical assets was estimated to be $125,866,162. This is NOT a fair market sales value.
- Almost two-thirds of all parishes recorded fewer than 50 people using the church building outside of Sunday service every week.
- In 2023, building expenses (not including insurance costs) represented 20 per cent of all expenses; staff expenses represented 50 per cent of all expenses.
- The average per person donation was $2,463 in 2023; only 14 parishes had average individual donations of more than $3,000 per year.

Building on these facts, members and leaders were asked to analyse their Strengths, Weakness Opportunities and Threats (SWOT). The results were organised into asset categories (spiritual, diversity, physical, social, financial and human) to better understand the multiple gifts upon which to build. Some comments straddle multiple SWOT categories (strengths can also be opportunities). Responses are provided in the estimated order of mentions.

Overall Diocesan Assessment

STRENGTHS (Internal)

- **Spiritual** strengths were the most noted (by far). Many churches referenced a balance between traditional Anglican approaches and modern adaptations, allowing for a range of theological approaches. Although varying in scale, most indicated worship experiences are enriched by strong sermons, quality teaching and talented music ministries. Several parishes provide study groups and socio-cultural activities, fostering a sense of community and offering opportunities for spiritual growth.
- Strong **leadership**, **dedicated clergy and multi-talented, steadfast members** are found in congregations. Lay participation and leadership are central.
- Most parishes say they are **welcoming** and provide **compassionate and affirming** environments for all members. Where relevant, they make efforts to welcome minorities.
- Congregations demonstrate **financial stability** through generous donor contributions and effective (frugal) financial management.

WEAKNESSES (Internal)

- **The lack of human resources** was noted most frequently. There is an (over) dependence on a single priest (whether full and/or part-time) in some churches, making them vulnerable to changes in leadership. The inability to secure a dedicated priest, along with many temporary placements, are common struggles. Many congregations face a shrinking membership base, particularly among youth, leading to fewer opportunities for family participation. A sense of member burnout exists due to increased expectations of a small number of aging volunteers and leadership teams.
- The aging demographics of congregations raises concerns about **future financial sustainability** and the continuity of programs.
- **Communication issues**, both internally and externally, often hinder effective outreach and engagement with newcomers.
- Churches also struggle with limited accessibility, **outdated facilities and maintenance challenges** impact participation and create significant financial liabilities.

OPPORTUNITIES (External)	THREATS (External)
• Opportunities are concentrated in areas of potential **community engagement** and outreach, often intended to increase membership. There is a recognition that greater involvement in social justice initiatives can unite church members and the local community. Outreach strategies to connect with marginalised groups and those affected by economic instability could strengthen church connections. Encouraging church activities that include the immigrant community and Indigenous perspectives could broaden inclusivity and engagement in "big tent Anglicanism." Developing partnerships with local schools, seniors' centres and community organisations can enhance visibility and collaboration. • More sophistication and dedicated energy in the use of **social media** are needed to tap into opportunities. • More structured **volunteer programs** and buddy systems could facilitate **new member integration** and community engagement. • Options such as church amalgamation or unions of some sort *rarely surfaced* (other than a few comments regarding the challenges inherent in that path). A few congregations are already pursuing such opportunities.	• Threats fall into two main categories: **spiritual and economic**. Both dynamics create challenges for modern ministry. For example, a post-Christian climate, with growing indifference to organised religion, poses challenges for membership and outreach. This is amplified by increased competition from other more evangelical churches. Secular activities are scheduled during Sundays which decreases congregational attendance. Churches are competing with busy lifestyles and alternative activities that draw potential members away from traditional service times. • Efforts to adapt worship styles and programming to attract younger generations need to be balanced against traditional practices. Navigating the fine line between **maintaining core Christian values and adapting to contemporary societal values** presents a significant challenge. • **Economic factors**, such as rising maintenance costs and financial instability, threaten church operations and outreach capabilities. Government regulations and funding volatility may limit operational capacity and increase financial pressures. Demand for services and rising homelessness in the vicinity (largely in urban centres) can strain community relationships and resources.

These perspectives were reinforced by the themes emerging from the key informant interviews. The dynamics and issues raised by these leaders are ignored at the peril of the Diocese. Examples of such thorny issues, include: the need for new models for clergy, the role and importance of church buildings, the centrality of children to current and future viability, the lack of a common understanding and approach to diversity and inclusion, and the imperative of re-setting the relationship between members of Diocese and the Synod leadership.

Some promising practices/models that address human resource challenges and increase the likelihood of sustainability into the next generation also surfaced. These approaches are already in place in some congregations and could be expanded upon elsewhere:

- Empowered congregations that have redefined the role and reliance on clergy.
- The Lodgepole Communitas which has placed two parishes, other denominations, Indigenous organisations, and social service agencies under one umbrella. There are other emerging contexts where this approach is also under development.
- Policies and support for congregations that have invested in children's ministry and whose child/youth numbers are growing.
- Emerging congregations (largely from BIPOC communities) that have the potential to tap into large numbers of youth and expand to meet greater needs and provide more mission and ministry opportunities.

A review of the information gathered led the consultant to make the following observations.

Have More in Common than Not. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing parishes are the same whether the parishes are in rural or urban settings. The big-picture Diocesan struggle is a common one.

Love of and Dedication to God is Palpable. Clearly bound by a deep love of God and each other, the members are doing everything they can to keep their church doors open and keep Christ at the centre of their lives.

Lack of Money is Not the Problem, Lack of Intergenerational Turnover Is. At the heart of the challenge is the lack of intergenerational turnover. Strategies to attract younger generations are largely absent. Simply chasing more revenue, through various earned income strategies, is highly unlikely to solve this problem.

Clear-headedness Prevails. Members were overwhelmingly clear-headed and practical when sharing their challenges and opportunities. This stoic, good-humoured approach will stand members in good stead as they chart the way forward.

Tension Regarding Self-direction and Leadership. There is a tension between parish empowerment and centralised leadership: from parishes wanting to chart their own destinies, to a desire for the Bishop to tell them what to do or provide additional support to expand their thriving ministries. There is a persistent “you” vs. “we” mentality throughout the parishes.

Health Metaphor. While all metaphors have their limitations, a health metaphor was selected as being most in keeping with the comments shared throughout the process. Some parishes are at the end stage of life and are in palliative care. One might say they are “actively dying.” As a guestimate, 33 percent of parishes fall into this category. The legacies of these parishes, people and buildings (including the maintenance of cemeteries) would have to be carefully defined to honour the traditions and memories of these sacred spaces. Other parishes are experiencing chronic health issues, which will result in their demise in the medium term, if drastic health measures are not taken. To get a new lease on life, several key lifestyle changes will have to be made. Investment into children's ministry and next-generation leadership along with the consolidation of parishes to allow for full-time clergy and support of mission work (both from human and financial resources’ points of view) will be required. Strictly as a guestimate, 42 percent of parishes fall into this category. The final group of parishes, approximately 25 percent, are thriving. They have an attendance of more than 150 people on a given Sunday and are experiencing a rebirth after COVID-19. Most have children's ministries in place, and all have at least one cleric. This subgroup is not immune to the same threats and weaknesses of other parishes, but it has the bandwidth to address them. Perhaps, with the sale of properties and the mergers of parishes, apportionment rates could decline for these remaining parishes. This policy change might free them up to grow into their fullest and best selves.

Conclusion

This phase of research was intended to support the next phase of work: discernment and decision-making regarding the future of the Diocese. By capturing both micro and macro strengths and liabilities, volunteers and paid leaders will be better equipped to identify future implications and generate practical solutions going forward. There are strong assets upon which to build: spiritual dedication, talented people, land and buildings, commitment to community service and diversity/inclusion. Determining how these can best be levered in a dynamic, sustainable future is the next challenge. This is best summed up by a member who stated, *“We have a wonderful vibrant growing parish. We are eager to know God more and serve others well. We need to learn to do things differently in order for the church to survive and thrive in the next generations.”*

Listening in Spirit: Summary of Phase 1

SECTION 1: Framework for Gaining Understanding

Background

In 2023, the Anglican Diocese of Edmonton (Diocese) committed to developing an action-oriented strategic plan to inform decision-making, resource allocation and ministry/service focus over the next five years.

Diocesan Executive Council placed a Request for Proposals (RFP) for competitive bid in November 2023. The RFP divided the planning process into stages. Stage 1 was intended to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current state of the Diocese. Stage 2 would then build on these results and focus on strategy development and action-planning. Genuine parish engagement, honesty and transparency were to be at the heart of the strategic planning process. Executive Council recognised this would require a balancing of perspectives and acknowledging that while parishes are empowered to oversee their affairs, the Diocese must steward and lead the people and parishes in the region. The analysis was to include quantitative and qualitative elements; be rooted in history while looking forward.

Deliverables

In February 2024, The Diocese hired Anna Bubel, of *Another Way*, to implement a work plan that included the following major deliverables. A steering committee comprised of Synod leaders oversaw her work.

Multi-dimensional Environmental Scan

- Confirming the scope of data collection based on available documents and data;
- Confirming and gathering contact information for all 46 parishes, priests and lay leaders;
- Soliciting quantitative information from the Diocese and parishes where required;
- Researching secondary data on demographics and regional trends;
- Reviewing, consolidating and summarising quantitative information;
- Identifying and closing gaps in the data;
- Writing two-page snapshot reports on all parishes and Synod leadership.

Engagement: Ground-truthing

- Developing a multi-pronged community engagement strategy using asset-based community development and appreciative inquiry approaches;
- Developing and summarising a member-based survey;
- Developing and summarising a priest and/or lay leader survey;
- Designing and holding face-to-face engagement sessions with all parishes;
- Holding an engagement session with the Synod Office staff and leadership;
- Holding and summarising individual interviews with selected leaders from across the parish;
- Writing two-page summaries of parish and Synod Office engagement sessions;
- Writing a Diocesan-wide summary of the results of Phase 1;
- Presenting findings to Executive Council.

*This exercise was not intended to act as a performance review of clergy or an evaluation of parish viability.

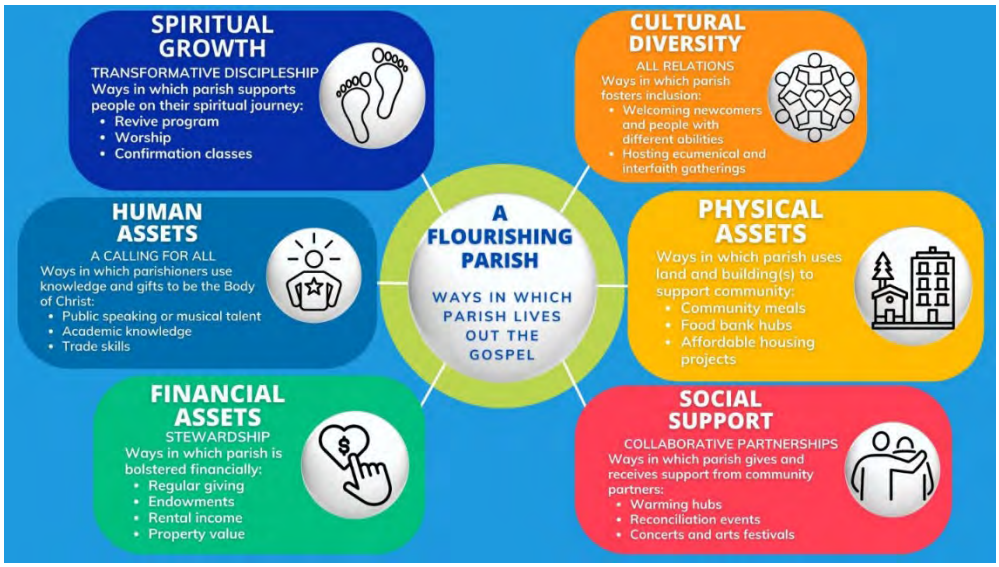
Findings

Another Way was retained to faithfully summarise the findings of this phase, keeping individual comments confidential, as promised to participants. To this degree, *Another Way* assumed responsibility for capturing, analysing and impartially reporting the findings. While the Diocese is the client and audience, this report is the work of the consultant and she assumes responsibility for its veracity (to the extent that subjective data can be accurately interpreted and summarised). Any overarching observations and/or opinions are hers alone.

Methods

Strength-Based Approach

Assets are the building blocks of all communities, including church communities. The United Nations Asset-Based Community Development Framework identifies six types of assets that offer a holistic picture of the capabilities, resources and strengths of communities. The approach asks, "What assets do we already have and how can we strengthen them?" These asset classes have been adapted to church communities. While no parishes maximise all their assets all the time, parishes flourish and are best able to live out the Gospel when they tap into all the gifts, resources and strengths available to them. See the diagram below for a visual illustration of this asset-based approach.



Multiple Avenues for Participation

By capitalising on the communication channels available to the Diocese, members were oriented to and updated on the Listening in Spirit campaign via newsletter, video, email and the pulpit. To maximise opportunities for participation, leaders and members were offered multiple ways to engage in the process: online surveys, individual interviews, face-to-face group sessions, as well as telephone and email exchanges. Whenever possible, in-person parish engagement sessions were scheduled at the convenience of the congregation, with meetings occurring on evenings, weekends and occasionally during the day.

SECTION 2: Participation

Timelines

Another Way began work in February 2024, primarily focusing on designing the research and engagement processes, as well as gathering quantitative data from the Diocese. Member and leader surveys were distributed in April. Parish engagement sessions were held between May and July. Online interviews with Diocesan leaders were also held during that period. The Synod Office and leadership session was held in early September. This intensive period of work was deemed necessary to accommodate summer holidays and the gathering of Synod in early October.

Participation

Quantitative and qualitative results from data searches and surveys of members and priest/lay leaders were compiled for all 46 parishes. A total of 617 member surveys were received, with numbers of responses ranging from 2 to 46 or roughly 13.5 per parish. Forty-four surveys were submitted by 44 priests or lay leaders (in churches that didn't have priests). Parish leaders signed off on the snapshot documents, agreeing that they were faithful summaries that could be shared with the Diocese. While these summaries did not involve or include the perspective of all members, the results reflect the information shared, including majority and minority opinions. In a few cases, parish profiles or current strategic plans were referenced to provide a broader picture of parish life. The Synod leadership survey was completed by nine people.

Community engagement sessions were held with each parish, albeit with a few variations. The sessions provided an overview of the Listening in Spirit campaign, verified findings and explored the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) that parishes face. Almost all the sessions (41) were held in person, in the parish church building. Three sessions were held either online (with a group), or via phone (with individual parish representatives.) Two parishes declined to attend either in person or online session. The participation rates at the sessions varied from parish to parish. Smaller parishes had greater turnout rates than larger parishes with more members. Sessions ranged from 2 to 44 people, with an average size of approximately 10. Where there was interest in reaching out to more members, offers of support were extended. The Synod leadership session (including staff, leadership and volunteers) was held in early September.

As the online surveys were anonymous, and respondents were not publicly identified at the engagement sessions, it is impossible to determine the total number of people who participated in this phase of the process. (Presumably there was some overlap between those who responded to the surveys and those who attended the online sessions, but the degree of overlap is unknown.) Overall, it is estimated that in smaller, mostly rural parishes, participation reached almost 100

percent of membership whereas in the more urban settings, participation may have been closer to 33 percent of members. To this extent, the results may not be generalised to the membership as a whole. It is unknown how well the views of participants reflected the opinions of the whole in cases where engagement was relatively low. Further, these data represent a snapshot in time (particularly, the ratings and member assessments). A few parishes emphasised that their summaries must be seen in a larger context, and encouraged referencing of their respective parish profiles, strategic plans and recent surveys.

Online interviews were conducted with 18 leaders from across the Diocese. The interviewees were selected by the Bishop and Synod staff based on the desire to have a range of voices and a cross-section of diverse members represented in the process.

While the depth of engagement was uneven, the range of parish involvement was tremendous – approaching 100 percent of parishes were involved to some degree. This is thanks, in part, to the encouragement of clergy and lay leaders. The verification of findings by parish representatives suggests that while participation rates were not what they might have been, the overall status of parish life was captured, and the views and analyses of participants were faithfully conveyed. These point-in-time summaries should be seen in the broader context of parish profiles, surveys and plans. (Several parishes have noted positive changes in 2024 which are not reflected in this report.)

All but two parishes ratified their individual parish summaries and SWOT analyses, with the caveat that these summaries reflected the opinions of those who participated, perhaps overemphasising minority opinions. *The two parish summaries and SWOT analyses that were not ratified are marked with a footnote.)

SECTION 3: Diocesan Level Results

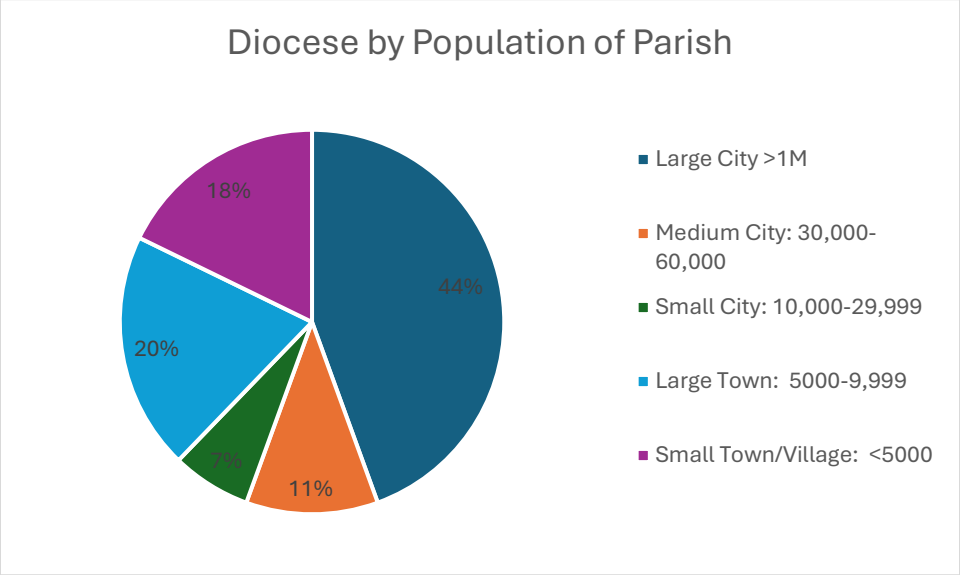
The following section provides an overview of the Diocese based on three data sources: parish summaries, Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) summaries and key informant interviews. See Appendix B for the individual parish summaries and SWOT analyses. They are organised alphabetically, by parish name.

When possible, direct quotes from members and leaders are provided in each section. These are differentiated from the body of the report by using *blue italics font.* These quotes are intended to lift up the "voices" of the people and help root the observations in the views and experiences of members and leaders.

Quantitative Data

Geographic Distribution

The Diocese is located in Treaty Six territory. The Edmonton Diocese covers a large geographic area – from Jasper in the west to Vermilion in the east. Parishes can be found in the provincial capital, with a population greater than one million, to small villages of fewer than 100 inhabitants. The following graph illustrates the population catchment areas of the parishes. Approximately two-thirds of all parishes are found in the larger census metropolitan area of Edmonton. Small and large towns represent approximately one-third of all parishes.



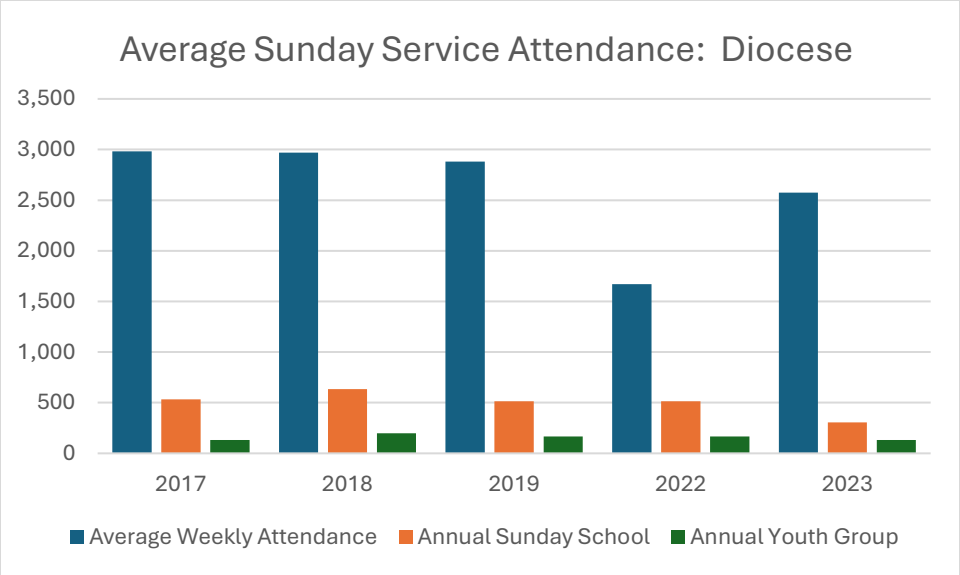
Population Projections

Areas outside the broader Edmonton region are expected to experience either no growth or an absolute decline in population by 2025. Further, several rural areas already have the highest concentrations of elderly residents in the province, with this trend expected to continue. The broader Edmonton region is expected to attract the second greatest number of children and working families in Alberta over the next 20 years. Almost 85 percent of Albertans are expected to live in the wide swath of the Edmonton – Calgary corridor by 2025.

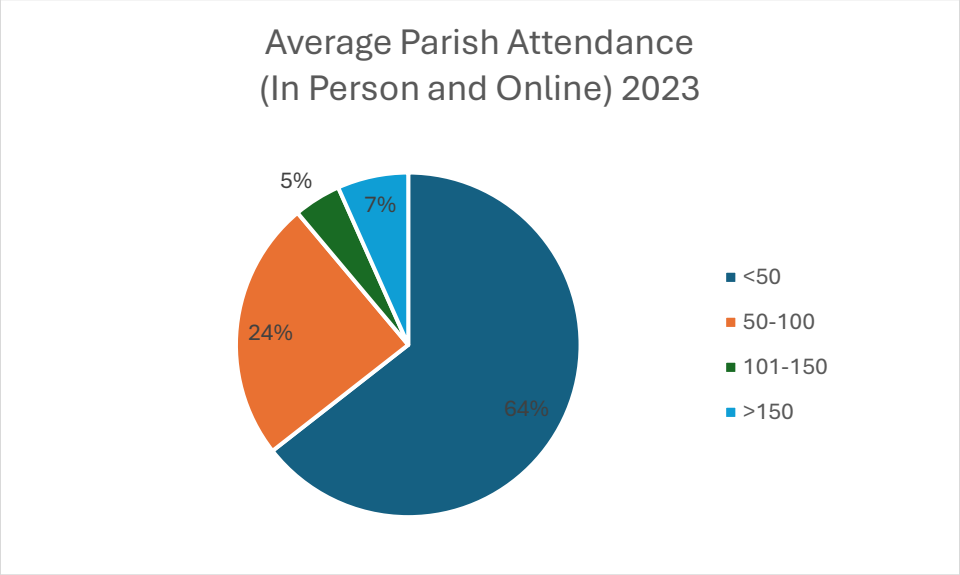
Membership

It is difficult to estimate the number of active members per parish. Parish membership rolls are known to be outdated, and Sunday service attendance numbers might not be the best proxy for participation as some parishioners might be highly engaged in church life but not able to attend services on Sundays. To add to the complexity, some congregations only meet in person while others have participatory services that involve online members in the service. Ultimately, Sunday attendance numbers were selected as the simplest and most consistent data available for church membership. The data referenced below was captured from reports provided by the parishes to the Diocese. (This proved to be less straightforward than initially imagined with a significant minority of parishes requiring changes to the data captured.)

In 2023, the Diocese averaged an attendance of 52 people (online and in person) per parish for Sunday services. This represents a decline of 14 per cent since 2017, with the steepest decline being felt during the COVID Pandemic years. The average number of children attending Sunday school has declined even more substantially with 42 percent fewer children attending Sunday school in 2023 than in 2017. The number of young people attending youth groups has remained steady for the same period. One hundred and thirty-three youth attended youth groups, across all 45 parishes, in 2023.



Overall attendance averages can distort the concentration of members by parish on a given Sunday. As the following chart illustrates, almost two-thirds of all parishes have less than 50 members attend Sunday service. One-quarter of all parishes see between 50 and 100 members for Sunday service.



Sixteen parishes, or one-third of the total number of parishes, have less than 25 members who attend church on Sunday. Fifteen of the sixteen are located outside the City of Edmonton, in large and small towns.

A review of 2023 statistics reveals that more funeral services (109) were conducted than baptisms (87) and marriages combined (20). A total of 38 confirmations were held last year.

Clergy and Lay Leaders

The Diocese of Edmonton has seen a significant decline in the number of clergy serving in parish ministry in recent years, to the point that it could be described as a shortage. Currently, there are 39 stipendiary priests, two-thirds of whom are paid full-time. This means that many parishes share a priest with another church or have one who is paid part-time. A few have no priests.

Priestly ministry is supplemented by 30 non-stipendiary priests who remain active to varying degrees in ministries of preaching, the celebration of the Eucharist, pastoral care and visitation, and other ministries within a parish. Though their ministries are much more occasional, volunteer priests represent around 40 per cent of all licensed and active priests in the Diocese. Without these volunteers, many parishes would struggle to maintain their current ministries.

There are 16 deacons serving in the Diocese of Edmonton. Of these, 3 are transitional deacons who are placed in employed parish ministry roles for the Diocese; 13 are permanent deacons. Of the 13, one deacon is paid as staff of the Synod Office while all the others are non-stipendiary. Deacons are critically important clergy that support the life of the parishes and the wider Diocese. Most of this ministry is offered on a volunteer basis.

A total of slightly more than 100 lay people are commissioned to provide licensed ministerial leadership within their congregation and to the Diocese, including Licensed Lay Readers, Licensed Lay Ministers, Licensed Lay Evangelists and Lay Hospital Visitors. This amounts to an average of slightly more than two such leaders per parish, though they are not evenly distributed. Of course, there are also hundreds of other lay members of parishes who, though not officially licensed to a specific ministry role, offer invaluable ministry leadership in a myriad of ways.

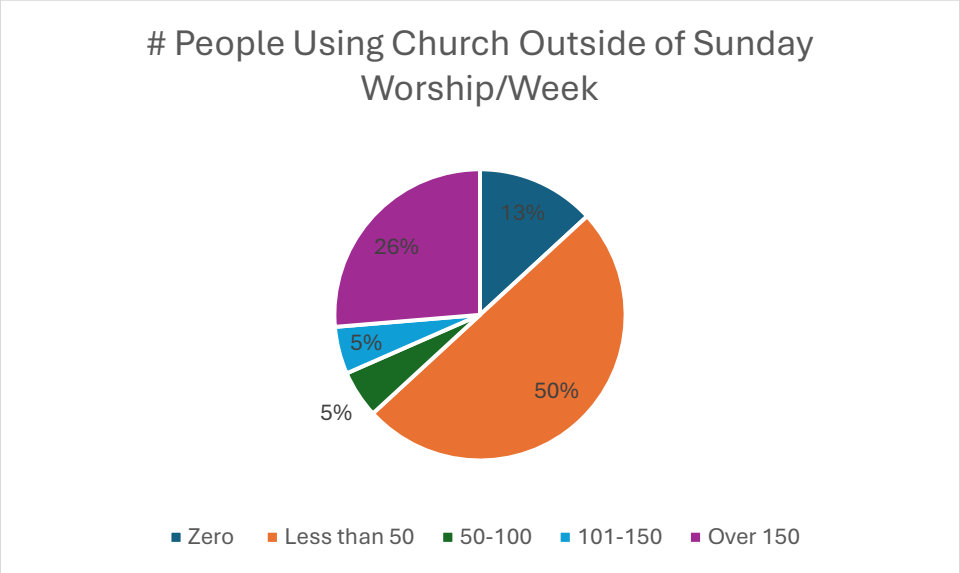
Physical Assets

The Diocese is the legal owner of the church buildings and lands (with one or two exceptions). It carries insurance for the replacement value of its buildings which are in various states of repair. This insurance value should not be confused with fair market value in the case of sale, or the value derived from a current building condition report (which most churches do not have.) The 2023 insurance replacement value of the inventory of all physical assets was estimated to be $125,866,162. This is *not* a sales value.

In 2023, building expenses represented 20 percent of all expenses, averaged for all parishes in the Diocese. This ratio increased by two percent since 2017, which suggests that while building expenses might have increased in absolute value terms, their contributions to overall expenses remained static.

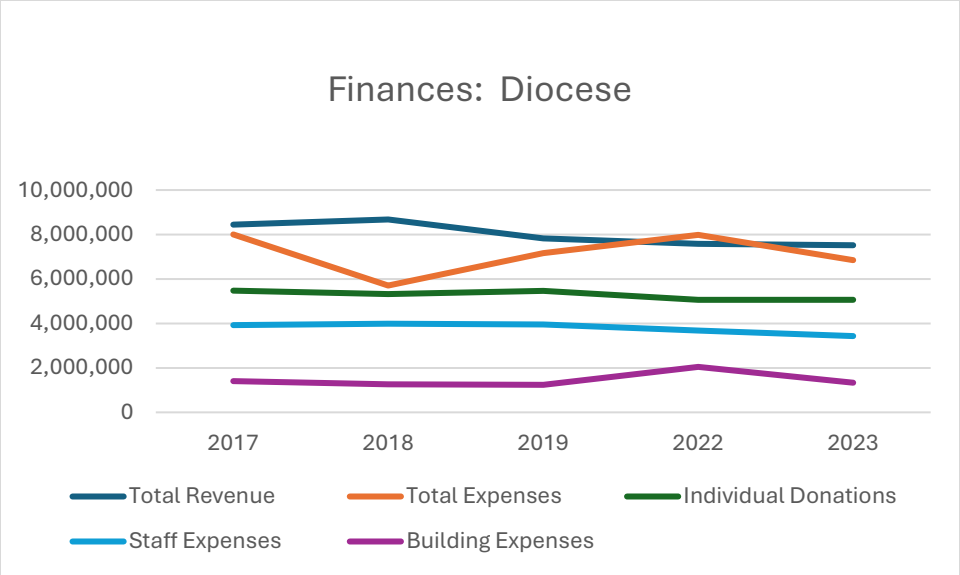
Based on survey data, church buildings are infrequently used outside of Sunday service. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) have less than 50 people enter/use the church very week. In many of these cases, the number of entrants is less than 10 per week. At the other extreme, are churches that are heavily used. One urban church has more than 400 people come through its doors every week.

The number of people using a church per week may be a good indicator of the vitality of a congregation and a good benchmark to assess the community value generated by an increasingly expensive to maintain real estate asset.

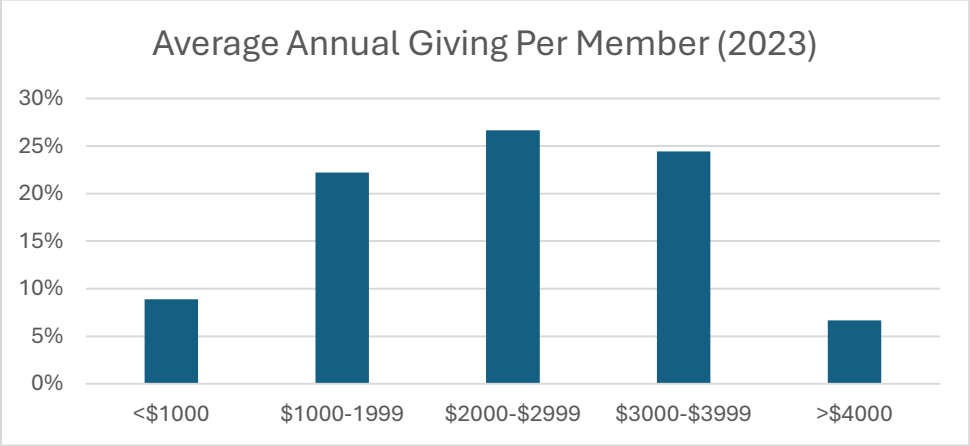


Financials

Parishes submit annual financial reports to the Diocese. This allows for a longer-term analysis of financial health. Between 2017 and 2023, total revenue declined by 11 per cent, however, expenses decreased by 14 percent, thereby allowing the Diocese to break even and enjoy a modest income cushion. In 2022, there were extraordinary, COVID-related expenses that declined slightly in 2023. (*The following graph does not include the years 2020 and 2021 as these COVID-19 years distorted the overall financial picture.)



Across the Diocese per person, average donations were $2,463 in 2023. A total of 17 parishes had greater than average donation levels; 14 parishes had average individual donations of more than $3,000 per year.



The rates of giving varied by region. The average Edmonton parishioner, for example, donated $2,241 in 2023, less than the average for all parishes. In contrast, parishes outside of Edmonton donated, on average, $2,641 per person in 2023. Further, 9 of the 14 most “heavily giving” parishes were in rural areas. While rural churches represent one-third of all parishes, rural members donate more per capita than two-thirds of all parish members in the Diocese. It appears that small numbers of very dedicated rural parishioners donate generously to keep their parishes afloat. They are doing what must be done to keep their doors open.

In 2023, staff expenses represented 50 percent of all expenses, averaged for all parishes. This ratio has increased by 1 percent since 2017. This consistent ratio might be due, in part, to the decrease in full-time clergy positions, rather than salaries remaining flat for the entire period. Staff costs are the biggest expense category of most congregations.

Thirty of the 46 parishes (65 percent) earn rental income. A greater number had rental income before the COVID-19 Pandemic but were not able to resume rentals afterwards. Most of the renters have a mission-related connection, e.g. other congregations, non-profit organisations or self-help groups. According to Synod records, earned income averaged $22,577 per parish. This represents a very wide range, from under $1,000 to more than $60,000 in 2023.

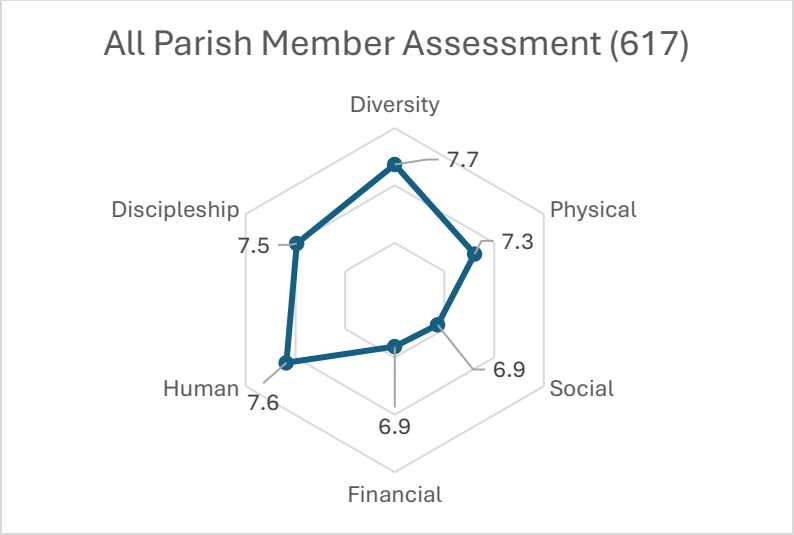
In most cases, building expenses are a significant portion of the total annual parish budget, with deferred maintenance representing a sizeable liability. Building-related expenses *(which do not include insurance costs)* represented 20% of all expenses in 2023. This averaged result obscures the burden of building responsibility. For example, there are 10 parishes where greater than $1,000 of annual, per-person giving went towards building expenses in 2023. Of these 10 parishes, 3 are in Edmonton and 7 are in smaller cities and towns.

Insurance expenses include both building and other liability expenses, and are captured as “miscellaneous” expenses in the Synod office records. Insurance premiums increased 135 percent between 2017 and 2023, from $165,318 to $389,117. The increase from 2021 to 2022 alone was 38 percent. *The general increase in property insurance claims associated with natural disasters and increased replacement coasts was further exacerbated by the surge in sexual assault claims and arsons against churches. There is little want for churches in the insurance industry and coverage in the future might become precarious.

Qualitative Data Arising from Parish Summaries

Members and clergy were asked to assess the strengths of their parishes in the six asset categories. It is recognised that these assessments were highly subjective and were not reliably aggregating. The averaged results were shared and discussed at the parish level and then aggregated to help paint a picture of the Diocese as a whole.

The aggregated results show an overall score in the 7 out of 10 range. The most highly rated classes were in the areas of diversity, human assets and discipleship. Financial assets and social support were given the lowest scores.



Discipleship: Key Themes Arising from Parish Summaries

Congregations value the ability to **worship and pray together**. Love of God and a desire to live this faith form the foundations of church life. For many, Sunday worship is the glue that holds parishes together. Almost all parishes have regular Sunday worship services. Larger congregations might have multiple Sunday services. Small parishes might meet weekly to worship together but are only able to celebrate the Eucharist once a month, depending on the availability of a priest. Prayer groups and prayer chains (formal and informal) are essential components of discipleship in the various church communities.

Opportunities for **spiritual growth and formation** are uneven and are concentrated in the Edmonton region where there are more varied opportunities to advance in the faith. For example, larger centres are more likely to have ongoing children's ministries, Sunday school programs, Bible studies and book groups. There is a recurring stated desire for more opportunities for spiritual growth.

Priestly leadership and ministry are highly valued, with congregations consistently stating their gratitude for clergy (irrespective of whether the clergy is full or part-time). The ability to hold services, and offer the Eucharist, is particularly treasured in some parishes where lay leaders do not feel comfortable leading services or offering prayers when a priest is not officiating. The role of retired Clergy (paid and otherwise) is extremely important, filling in where salaried clergy are not available and lending “credibility” to the service.

Lay leadership is strong, with parishioners involved in church duties, ministry, and leadership roles (to say nothing of ongoing custodial and maintenance services). Empowered lay leaders participate well beyond the bounds of vestry and show

active leadership in service delivery, pastoral care, post-service fellowship and prayer ministry.

- *Focus on Biblical Truth: excellent music/hymns/worship/liturgy; prayer ministry; strong membership engagement/use of many gifts, and talents; numerous other ministries and outreach groups*
- *We are supported by a priest for one-quarter time only. This means we are, spiritually, largely self-sustaining, which is good for finances and personal involvement in the parish community. We are blessed with competent and willing lay leadership. We make use of technology to reach those who find church attendance difficult.*
- *We are embracing and raising up local ministry. Bringing along new people into prayerful roles, visiting each other, and offering new worship opportunities.*
- *We are hard-working, faithful Christians who love God and each other and have a desire to see God's love grow in our community.*
- *Large diverse parish that has had frequent shortages in staffing (rector, children ministry and admin) over the past 5 years. Despite that, we have children and youth ministry and a variety of ministries.*
- *Predominantly older parishioners, but with a new vibrant priest more young people are part of the worship, updated music included, and more fun sermons for children who participate.*
- *Our parish is not offering regular Bible study, prayer times or confirmation classes.*

Diversity: Key Themes

The term diversity is understood in radically different ways; the experience of diversity is broad and not immediately obvious to the outsider. This inconsistent and highly subjective understanding of diversity bears mentioning as what appear to be highly homogenous congregations (whether they be all elderly and Caucasian or middle-aged and all Sudanese), feel diverse to their members. In the first example, members see themselves as being theologically diverse (Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists), as well as diverse in terms of their physical abilities. In the latter example, the congregation includes people from numerous South Sudanese tribes and has many women in key leadership positions. Add to this, the experiences of people of colour who speak to varying types of inclusion (despite virtually all parishes stating that they are welcoming of everyone). How congregations understand, and experience diversity should be examined in greater depth, with love and openness to how people experience diversity and inclusion in their parishes.

Overall, when asked to describe diversity in parish life, people include promoting inclusivity and equality, celebrating different abilities and gender identities, embracing multiculturalism and ecumenical diversity, and fostering a culture of respect and understanding. These themes are evident in the various church communities' efforts to welcome and integrate people from different backgrounds, cultures and beliefs. The commitment to diversity is also reflected in the efforts to address social and economic diversity within the congregations. Additionally, the recognition and celebration of diversity are seen in the support for interfaith dialogue and cooperation, as well as in the visible display of pride flags and the promotion of 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy. Overall, the key themes in diversity emphasise the importance of creating welcoming and inclusive environments for all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds or identities.

At their best, parishes focus on being a place of radical welcome for people of all cultures, values and beliefs, as well as efforts to celebrate diversity and promote inclusivity within the church community.

It must be noted there is a persistent minority opinion that flows throughout some urban and rural parishes. In these small cases, parishioners believe the Anglican church policy on the inclusion and full welcoming of 2SLGBTQ+ people is causing harm. It is both causing division within the church and preventing more conservative and/or evangelical people from joining Anglican congregations. This perspective appears to be rooted in theological concerns as much as practical ones. There is an even smaller number of members who have stated there is too much emphasis on Indigenous reconciliation.

- *Diverse congregation with many ethnicities. We have celebrated this at Christmas Lessons and Carols and at Pentecost by having scripture read and hymns sung in other languages.*
- *There is great diversity among the population in the parish, culturally, financially, educationally and mentally, which poses many challenges for our parish.*
- *We are an affirming parish and have always been 2SLGBTQ+ friendly.*
- *I believe our lack of diversity makes us vulnerable to becoming irrelevant.*
- *We are a place where everyone is welcomed and made to feel at home.*

Physical Assets (Land/Building): Key Themes

The physical assets of the Diocese appear to be in **good working order** – lands and buildings are well maintained, largely on the volunteer power of members. There appears to be much pride in the upkeep of the churches.

The **styles and sizes of the church buildings range** from very small (chapels that hold no more than 50) to very large (the Cathedral in Edmonton holds 600+ people). In some cases, the chapel is the only asset, while in other instances, the sanctuary is supplemented by main floor and basement meeting spaces, commercial kitchens and other buildings such as rectories. A handful of congregations operate out of church buildings on a seasonal basis as they are not equipped to operate over winter. Many parishes boast beautiful stained-glass windows, and a good number are beautifully appointed historic buildings.

The **use of church buildings varies tremendously,** with a significant portion only being used for Sunday services. On the other extreme, some buildings are used seven days a week with significant programming and use by and for the neighbouring community. Some churches have virtually no surplus land while several others use such land to create community gardens and/or programming space during the summer. Some are incapable of generating any rental revenue due to the nature of their physical assets while others can maximise the use of their large buildings and have a full rental complement. It is impossible to compare the relative and/or effective use of the physical inventory given such diverse holdings.

Most, if not all, churches are **wheelchair accessible.** Significant resources have been invested in the accessibility of buildings including ramps, elevators and lifts. In several parishes, there have also been investments in audio visual and technological options that increase access to people who would otherwise not be able to participate. The availability of online worship is a significant step towards the inclusion of parishioners with visual or hearing impairments as well as those who are neurodiverse.

There is significant concern about the **increased operating costs** associated with the upkeep of church buildings. Especially, as the buildings age, the cost of ongoing maintenance increases, particularly with big-ticket items, such as roof repair and HVAC replacement. Additionally, there are financial challenges associated with consistent increases in utility and insurance expenses. Finally, in many churches, interior and exterior maintenance is provided by volunteers, as is ongoing custodial and grounds work. With the aging of congregations, the ability to provide this free service is time limited.

We have spent at least the past 10 years tending to repairs needed to maintain our church building. This has been a drain on both financial and human assets such that we have stagnated in our outreach programs. We have managed to maintain the building enough to be able to rent to a playschool and evening karate club over these years and also to provide space for other community rentals. But we are not able to give freely of our space or human assets since we always need a rental income to prop up our financial assets.

- *The building and land are well-used by community groups and our parish.*
- *Our building is in constant use - 430 people come into the church/week outside of worship services.*
- *Financial increases, insurance, taxes, utilities and maintenance of the building are a constant challenge.*
- *We are very committed to sharing our church and inviting the neighbourhood to participate in events. This has been very successful with our Easter egg hunt and summer BBQ. The turnout has been terrific.*

Social Supports: Key Themes

Social supports take many forms and include community engagement, **partnerships with other churches and community groups, outreach activities, and addressing the needs of the community**. Several churches mentioned hosting events such as community dinners, summer garden concerts and food security programs to serve those in need. Additionally, partnerships with organisations, such as AA, mental health groups and the local food bank were highlighted as vibrant and important aspects of social support. There is also a **focus on inclusivity and welcoming everyone**, as well as efforts to respond to the needs of the community and build relationships with neighbouring churches.

The **engagement in outreach activities,** such as providing food and shelter to those in need, holding services at local lodges, and participating in community initiatives, reflects a commitment to serving and supporting the broader community. Efforts to engage in truth and reconciliation, support marginalised communities, and advocate for social justice issues are evident in the church communities' discipleship activities.

In a few instances, it is the provision of this social ministry that appears to define the mission of the parish. A good example of this is a ministry in Edmonton which combines two parishes working collaboratively with Indigenous groups, other congregations, and social service organisations. Another parish is located next to a funeral home and has adapted its church building to allow for caskets to be easily transported to and from the church. The parish's central community service mission is to provide a reception for every funeral; providing love, care and community in a time of grief.

- *We have Kate's Kitchen every last Thursday of the month. Everyone in the community is welcome to enjoy fellowship and the meal. We have the thrift shop. We have monthly missions that respond to work bees at the food bank and friendship center. We give away grocery and gas cards to people who knock at our church door seeking help. Most of those people who seek help are homeless.*

- *Community need vastly exceeds our ability to cope.*
- *With a declining population it is more difficult for us to be involved in the community. We have had to give up some events (e.g. Fair Booth) because of the age of parishioners.*
- *The people of our parish are largely activated and excited by the idea that God calls them to ministry. Not that all have confidence in putting that into practice, but nobody will disagree with the thought that God calls us to participate in His mission in His world and that this is a good and welcome thing.*
- *We are quite strong on local outreach, refugees, contact with elderly or sick shut-ins, open to seekers, First Nations and people with challenges.*

Financial: Key Themes

Overall, the key themes related to financial assets reflect the financial struggles, income sources, budgets, expenses, accountability requirements and resource limitations faced by the parishes.

Financial Struggles: Many of the parishes are facing financial challenges, with deficits in their budgets and limited resources to cover expenses. Some are managing financially but with a small buffer, while others are experiencing diminishing financial support.

Increased Reliance on Earned Income Sources: The parishes generate income from various sources such as rental revenue from AA, Al-Anon, NA, and Girl Guides, as well as parking stalls and cell tower rentals. Some also engage in town-wide garage sales and other fundraising activities such as highway garbage picking to help offset costs.

Budgeting and Expenses: Parishes must carefully manage their finances to cover staff expenses, building expenses, and individual donations. Some have passed deficit budgets, while others have seen their significant reserves depleted. Many have stated they have no control over the increased costs which makes it hard to manage and plan.

Financial Accountability: Although parishes have financial accountability processes in place, with financials and future year budgets approved by the vestry, there is a desire for greater financial accountability. Leadership should be held accountable for gains and losses. Comments regarding the need for accountability appear to be more closely tied to not reaching income targets, rather than over-spending.

Limited Resources: The aging of congregations along with declining membership in some parishes are leading to limitations in financial resources, as well as challenges in finding volunteers and sustaining any fundraising work. When financial resources become tight, parishes scale back clergy hours and seek out part-time or priest-sharing arrangements.

- *Aged seniors are financially supporting the church. How will we cope if younger people aren't able to financially contribute?*
- *Our finances are currently stable, but money has been tight. It is nice to not feel financially strapped all the time and to focus more on outreach, spiritual growth, service, Christian fellowship and worship.*
- *I feel a burnout from constantly being asked for just a bit more money for monthly donations. Otherwise, it's being asked to subsidise building needs, constantly. Many parish members are on fixed incomes and just don't have the resources for this.*
- *We have a core of strong regular givers who also give additional donations to meet the parish's needs from time to time. I would characterise our finances as tenuous from year to year although we have made some investments with a bequest that was received and also benefited from the salary support during COVID.*
- *We continue to improve our financial situation through rentals to various groups. The opening of a daycare in our building should grow our relationships within the local community.*

Human: Key Themes

Overall, human assets, or the people power fuelling the parishes, are recognised as essential for overall wellbeing and growth of faith communities. There is a shared desire to strengthen and mobilise these assets for the benefit of all.

Volunteer Engagement: Several parishes express the need for more volunteers to support their ministries and community outreach efforts. They recognise the importance of engaging parishioners and encouraging them to use their skills and talents for the benefit of the faith community.

Leadership and Staff: The role of clergy, staff and lay leaders is highlighted as crucial for the growth and vitality of the parishes. The quality of leadership, including the ability to inspire and guide the congregation, is seen as essential for the future of the church. The declining ability to retain full-time clergy is both a problem and an opportunity. For example, some younger priests are only able to obtain part-time parish appointments and must supplement their priestly duties with other paid work. If parishes were to be consolidated, more attractive full-time positions could be created.

Aging Population and Youth Engagement: Many parishes mention the challenges of an aging congregation and the need to attract and engage younger members. The impacts of aging congregations are multi-dimensional: spiritual (inability to attend Bible studies and greater demand for visitation); financial (most are on fixed incomes and cannot donate more than they currently do); social (many don't have the capacity to do the amount of volunteer work they once did); and physical (their ability to provide custodial and maintenance services is diminished). Members express a desire to involve more youth in church activities and to find meaningful ways to nurture their faith.

Community Support and Collaboration: Parishes emphasise the importance of building strong relationships within the community and collaborating with other organisations. They seek to be a welcoming and supportive presence for all, addressing social needs and engaging in interfaith dialogue.

Financial Stewardship: The financial aspects of human assets are also mentioned, including the very careful stewardship of resources, and the impact of limited financial capacity on the parish's ability to carry out its mission and ministry.

- *Our parish is a small, aging, exhausted one. There are so few volunteers and often only 12 or so in church. Few people are able to undertake the positions that need to be filled or do the jobs that need to be done.*
- *This is a welcoming parish with outstanding preaching and leadership supported by our rector. We are also blessed by musical leadership that adds a meaningful dimension to worship.*
- *We have an aging congregation, with an encouraging number of young families with children. We want to see our church continue to grow and thrive. It is important to us.*
- *We are an incredibly busy parish and a well-oiled machine ensuring that needs are met administratively, pastorally, liturgically, mentally, physically and socially. This is a very lay-empowered parish that understands the importance of time, talent and treasure. Many the gifts. Many the works. One in the Lord of all.*
- *Many parishioners are involved in roles in our community. We have a ministry schedule that includes all volunteers. We have two retired clergy members who help when needed and we have a deacon and lay people who help out as well.*

Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats: Key Themes

Participants in the engagement sessions worked to identify the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats facing their parishes. Strengths and Weaknesses referred to dynamics within the parish, whereas Opportunities and Threats referred to influences outside the parish (i.e. local or societal forces). Members were encouraged to think holistically about these various factors and were referred to the asset-based community development model to help them think through the many dimensions of parish life. What follows is an aggregation of this analysis, organised into asset categories. Occasionally, comments were moved to reflect the internal vs. external frame of reference. This was particularly true when reviewing threats, when in a significant number of cases the aging of the congregation was seen as a threat rather than a weakness. In such instances, the comments were moved, but not edited.

Summary of SWOT Analysis Across All Asset Types

Overall Strengths

Spiritual strengths were, by far, the most noted strength. No other categories combined, received as many comments. Many churches referenced a balance between traditional Anglican approaches and modern adaptations, allowing for a range of theological approaches. Although varying in scale, most indicated that they have strong sermons, quality teaching and talented music ministries that enrich worship experiences. Several parishes provide study groups and sociocultural activities, fostering a sense of community and offering opportunities for spiritual growth.

Strong leadership, dedicated clergy and multi-talented members make for strong human resources within congregations. Lay participation and leadership are central.

Most parishes say they are welcoming and provide compassionate and affirming environments for all members. Where relevant, they make efforts to welcome minorities.

Congregations demonstrate financial stability through generous donor contributions and effective financial management.

Overall Weaknesses

The identified weaknesses were not concentrated in one category, but largely touched on human resources. For example, there is an overdependence on a single priest (full and/or part-time) in some churches, making them vulnerable to changes in leadership. The inability to secure a dedicated priest, with many temporary

placements is also a common struggle. Many congregations face a shrinking membership base, particularly among youth, leading to fewer opportunities for family participation. A sense of member burnout exists due to increased expectations of a small number of volunteers and leadership teams.

The aging demographic of congregations raises concerns about future financial sustainability and the continuity of programs. Many parishes break even or incur small deficits with a reliance on a small number of donors.

Communication issues, both internally and externally, often hinder effective outreach and engagement with newcomers. Churches also struggle with limited accessibility, outdated facilities and maintenance challenges impacting overall engagement.

Overall Opportunities

Overall, opportunities are concentrated in areas of potential community engagement and outreach. For example, there is a recognition that greater involvement in social justice initiatives can unite church members and the local community. Outreach strategies to connect with marginalised groups and those affected by economic instability could strengthen church connections. Encouraging church activities that include the immigrant community and Indigenous perspectives could broaden inclusivity and engagement. Developing partnerships with local schools, seniors' centres and community organisations can enhance visibility and collaboration. More sophistication and dedicated energy in the use of social media are needed.

More structured volunteer programs and buddy systems could facilitate new member integration and community engagement. Options such as church amalgamation or unions of some sort rarely surfaced (other than a few comments regarding the challenges inherent in that path), in congregations already engaged in pursuing such opportunities.

Overall Threats

The overall threats fall into two main categories: spiritual and economic. Both dynamics create challenges for modern ministry. For example, a post-Christian climate, with growing indifference to organised religion, poses challenges for membership and outreach. This is amplified by increased competition from other more evangelical churches. Secular activities are scheduled during Sundays which decreases congregational attendance. Churches are competing with busy lifestyles and alternative activities that draw potential members away from traditional service times.

Efforts to adapt worship styles and programming to attract younger generations need to be balanced against traditional practices. Navigating the fine line between maintaining core Christian values and adapting to contemporary societal values presents a significant challenge.

Economic factors, such as rising maintenance costs and financial instability, threaten church operations and outreach capabilities. Government regulations and funding volatility may limit operational capacity and increase financial pressures. Demand for services and rising homelessness in the vicinity (largely in urban centres) can strain community relationships and resources.

Deeper Dive

A frequency analysis was used to generate the most common responses to each asset category. These are provided below, using the SWOT framework, to provide a deeper understanding of the themes noted above. Note that in several cases, the categories overlap. For example, a current weakness can also be seen as a future opportunity. The results are organised based on how they were presented by the parishes.

Discipleship Strengths

Spiritual strengths are the core of parish life:

- Strong Anglican practices and liturgy (traditional and contemporary)
- Commitment to following Jesus and teaching each other
- Openness to new ideas and approaches to worship
- Inclusion and welcoming of diverse congregations
- Strong study groups and preaching
- Variety of opportunities for spiritual development and experience
- Strong core group and committed lay readers
- Sunday school and year-round kids' clubs
- Authentic worship and liturgy with Eucharist
- Ministry to shut-ins and spiritual development opportunities

Discipleship Weaknesses

The most common weaknesses indicate a need for improvement in engaging and retaining young people, providing diverse and inclusive worship experiences and fostering a stronger sense of community and spiritual growth within the congregations:

- Lack of availability of Sunday school
- Lack of activities for young people and not reaching the youth

- Traditional Anglican service/liturgy not resonating with young people
- Declining/flat attendance
- Lack of purposeful attempts at interfaith activity
- Gaps in demographics and lack of diversity
- Difficulty in involving new parishioners in parish life
- Difficulty in introducing new people to the Anglican way
- Shyness in spreading the word of the Lord
- Not providing space for adults to grow their faith/lack of Bible study
- Straying from the gospel (minority opinion)

Discipleship Opportunities

The following opportunities present potential for growth, collaboration and community engagement in discipleship:

- Offering programs to encourage young people and children to attend, as the aging population may not be able to provide such programming
- Partnering with other congregations and groups to expand and enrich the parish
- Offering spiritual activities for all ages and exploring and strengthening faith through Bible studies, book studies and other faith development programs
- Increasing support for Sunday school, youth ministries and discipleship programs
- Collaborative sharing and ministry with other congregations and communities

Discipleship Threats

The following threats pose significant challenges to discipleship and spiritual growth within the church community:

- Declining attendance and engagement, especially among the younger generation
- Competition from other churches with more resources and appealing programs for youth and children
- Over-scheduled and busy lives leave limited time to engage in church activities
- Increase in non-Christian immigration and a post-Christian society leading to growing indifference to church and faith
- Lack of spiritual teaching or support in schools, as well as societal changes leading to a decrease in the need for traditional church offerings in rural areas
- Lack of visibility and negative views of the church in the community, as well as a decline in the need for what churches normally supplied
- Social media misinformation and people spending time on screens instead of engaging in in-person activities

Diversity Strengths

Parishes repeatedly stated a commitment to welcoming and embracing diversity among parishioners, as well as a willingness to interact with various faith communities. Additionally, some churches have diverse congregations in terms of members with varying ages, genders, orientations and ethnicities. A few parishes are steered by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) leaders. Two of these are considered “ethnic” parishes which only serve their country-of-origin populations. A number of these BIPOC parishes want to grow and thrive to better serve their communities. Overall, parishes boast a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, with a focus on being non-judgmental and open-minded

Diversity Weaknesses

There is an acknowledged lack of cultural diversity in many congregations, including gaps in demographics, and a lack of diversity in leadership. With some notable exceptions, there is also a lack of engagement with Indigenous people and people of colour. Where people of colour are leading parishes, there is a concern about the next generation not sharing the same values and being raised in a different culture with different values. The affirming Anglican theology continues to create tension within a few congregations.

Diversity Opportunities

Opportunities to expand diversity include the chance to interact with various faith communities and to welcome and provide a soft-landing place for those who have been hurt or disillusioned in their church experience. Additionally, the church can expand its outreach to diverse cultural groups, and partner with other churches to provide programs that encourage young people and children to attend. There is also an opportunity to participate in community events and celebrations to further embrace and welcome diversity within the congregation as well as outreach to Indigenous communities and the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Diversity Threats

The diversity threats are rooted in the past as well as the present. For example, due to recent and historic events, there is a poor opinion of religion and church in society. Young people are “spiritual, not religious.” Additionally, there are concerns about the church's limited outreach to minority groups and the experiences of racism within the church reported by some BIPOC parishioners. Increasing anti-2SLGBTQIA+ sentiments expressed by other churches and levels of government is a threat. These factors contribute to the challenges of maintaining a diverse and inclusive community within the church.

Physical Assets Strengths

Physical assets include well-maintained buildings with ample parking, good acoustics, and a comfortable worship space. Additionally, the availability of space for collaborative sharing, building rental opportunities, mission ministry, and the potential for multi-purpose use of the building are also noted as strengths. Some churches also have access to technology, such as live-streaming equipment and Wi-Fi, which enhances their physical assets. The size of the building and the potential for growth, as well as the proximity to transportation stations and sufficient parking, are also highlighted as strengths in the physical assets category.

Physical Assets Weaknesses

The weaknesses of the various parishes include aging buildings requiring more frequent upkeep, lack of energy efficiency and costly repairs. Additionally, some buildings have temperamental elevators and accessibility issues. The underutilisation of church buildings and the limited availability of space for rental income is more problematic in areas with lots of surplus community space available for rent. Some churches also lack modern technology capabilities, such as running computers and sound systems, which could hinder their outreach and engagement efforts. Increasing operating costs create significant financial strains for numerous congregations.

Physical Assets Opportunities

Physical assets allow for collaboration with other parishes to offer youth activities, reconciliation and social justice ministries, and host multiple services and joint services. Specific opportunities include the following:

- Providing space for collaborative sharing and outreach
- Collaborating with other congregations and communities for ministry and outreach
- Renting out the church building for community events and activities
- Exploring the potential for building rentals to generate income
- Making the church building and hall available for use by different community groups
- Exploring the possibility of amalgamation with other churches to ease the financial burden of maintaining the building
- Utilising the church building for events and activities such as outdoor services, community barbecues and concerts
- Focusing on making relationships with the homeless and those in need
- Invite musicians to hold concerts and worship services

Physical Assets Threats

The threats include competition with other churches offering more amenities and programs, shrinking attendance leading to financial strain, and the impact of extreme weather events on accessibility and building condition. Additionally, some churches face challenges in maintaining their properties due to rising costs, lack of public transit, vandalism and security concerns. The threat of the church not being relevant today and the potential loss of property tax exemption also pose challenges to the physical assets of these churches.

Social Supports Strengths

These strengths demonstrate a commitment to fostering a supportive and inclusive environment within the church community, as well as actively engaging with and serving the broader community through various outreach and support initiatives:

- Strong fellowship and sense of community within the congregation
- Support system for members who are unable to attend church, such as visitation of shut-ins and infirm
- Active social life and opportunities for fellowship, including community suppers and other gatherings
- Strong emphasis on community ministry, directly and indirectly through community partners and renters (AA)
- Vibrant food security ministries and community outreach, such as hosting a food bank depot, community garden, labyrinth, etc.
- Engagement with the community through outreach programs, partnerships with other churches and involvement in social activities, such as community BBQs and events.

Social Supports Weaknesses

These weaknesses indicate a lack of diverse and inclusive social support, financial and volunteer limitations, communication gaps and a need for more active engagement with the community:

- A lack of people means we can't do the level of community support we would like
- Lack of involvement in activities (outside of Sunday service)
- Insufficient financial resources to support community efforts
- Potential burnout of volunteers and the need for more volunteers
- Lack of youth and young adults and ministry for them
- Not including many cultural diversities and lack of presence in newly expanding suburbs
- Because the church building is vacant most of the time, homeless people camp out on church land

Social Supports Opportunities

- Collaborating with other communities and organisations for outreach opportunities, such as seniors' homes, youth clubs and welcoming new residents
- Providing a safe place for those with diverse opinions to use the facility and engage with the community via various events and activities
- Offering home or phone visits to parishioners who don't attend and reaching out to stay-at-home/shut-in parishioners
- Participating in community events such as Remembrance Day, town garage sale, Pioneer Day, and military population events
- Collaborating with other congregations, as well as identifying community partners, to work with parish helpers for outreach efforts
- Working with the community league, local schools and other groups on shared events and activities
- Reaching out and involving newcomers as they arrive in Edmonton
- Partnering with other parishes to expand the Diocesan refugee sponsorship program.

Social Supports Threats

The demand for community service far outstrips what parishes can supply and/or dedicate funds for. Add to this, declining attendance, competition from other church ministries with more amenities and programs, and the societal view of organised religion as divisive or judgemental. Additionally, there are challenges related to government regulatory requirements and the aging population, leading to limited volunteerism and financial support

Financial Assets Strengths

Most churches have some measure of financial stability and the ability to provide a foundation to continue their operations and support their ministries. There is a strong history of tithing, supplemented by annual suppers and bake sales, revenue-generating activities and income from building rentals. A few congregations operate social enterprises, such as a bakery and a thrift store. Very few congregations rely on ongoing financial support from the Diocese. A few are managing thanks to the bequests of deceased parishioners.

Financial Assets Weaknesses

For most congregations, irrespective of how large or small, financial viability and medium-term sustainability are top-of-mind concerns. The financial weaknesses include increasing expenses, shrinking income, rising costs associated with maintaining buildings and a lack of financial buffer, making the church reactive to emergency capital repairs. There are concerns about the financial impact of aging

congregations and declining numbers. The lack of younger individuals contributing financially poses a threat to church finances. There is also a lack of financial stability in some churches due to the loss of income from the death of parishioners. There is insufficient funding for full-time ministry.

Financial Assets Opportunities

Opportunities to improve the finances of the various parishes include:

- Renting out the church building and hall for community events and activities
- Collaborating with other churches for joint ministry and sharing of resources
- Increasing rental income by advertising the availability of the building and parking lot
- Exploring new ways to maintain an Anglican presence and generate income, such as open houses and tours of the graveyards
- Considering other service times, days and locations to attract more attendees and potential donors
- Emphasising the importance of tithing and regular giving
- Exploring partnerships with local businesses and organisations to support the church financially
- Seeking benefactors and exploring the potential of cell tower rentals to generate additional income

Financial Assets Threats

The threats for the various churches include the larger financial depression, which is affecting giving, and the larger numbers of churches also competing for donations and members. In a minority of cases, the Diocesan requirements requiring insurance and child safety are seen to be driving up costs and/or decreasing revenue-generating potential.

Human Assets Strengths

People power is another source of deep and wide strength within the parishes. What follows is a sampling of the description of how human resources fuel the parishes and connect with the other asset dimensions:

- Committed lay readers, welcoming congregation, strong core group and a great leader in our priest
- Inclusive, welcoming, non-judgmental, true care and compassion for each other and strong leadership
- Committed parishioners, strong Sunday school leadership and a welcoming attitude
- Dedicated parishioners, strong Anglican practices and a very committed priest

- Welcoming attitude, accepting, interacting with new families and a diverse group of mentors
- Openness to new approaches and practices, financial stability, and strong leadership
- Strong study groups, strong preaching, and a diverse congregation
- Punches above weight class, financially stable, and a strong, multi-talented congregation
- The prayerful and dedicated congregation, excellent pastor and a welcoming family atmosphere
- Excellent music ministry; a dedicated team

Human Assets Weaknesses

These weaknesses indicate a lack of human resources overall, financial and volunteer limitations, communication gaps, and a need for more active engagement with the community. As with the strengths, the weaknesses have implications across asset groups:

- Aging congregation with limited activity
- Lack of presence in the community due to a very part-time, remotely located minister
- No music ministry, Sunday school, or youth group— no one is coming in behind
- Loss of music ministry
- Lack of cultural diversity in leadership
- Volunteer burnout and generational divide
- Few priests are interested in rural ministry, making it hard to find an eager, affordable priest
- An overburdened, small number of volunteers; lacking age groups with surplus time and energy
- Lack of activities for young people and lack of engagement of new members in service/volunteerism
- No full-time priest, implications for the future
- No human resources for fundraising
- Communication gaps
- Lack of communication between the Diocese and parish
- Cliques and lack of transparency on how people can participate
- Bullying behaviours by some members affect the community and the comfort level of newcomers
- Lack of admin support

Human Assets Opportunities

There were some ideas to attract new members and increase the human resources available to the parish. These include the ones listed below:

- Collaboration with other denominations to grow the choir and music ministry
- Reviving the 8:30 am service to attract new attendees
- Educate people about the Anglican faith and tradition to engage and educate the community
- Collaborate with other churches to create events for young adults and increase community interactions
- Focus on improving online capabilities to reach various demographics and increase rentals
- Increase outreach efforts through community interactions, advertising and by attending events
- Explore the possibility of partnering with daycares to encourage families to try the church
- Organise more non-clergy pastoral care. Need increased efforts to reach out to the ill, lonely, questioning in need of support.

Human Assets Threats

- Working parents means the loss of young families attending
- We live in a post-Christian world with growing indifference to church/faith so fewer people attend church
- Lack of church directory due to regulations and privacy concerns - FOIP/PIPA requirements limit contact sharing
- Demographic bias means working people cannot attend any programs during the day
- Boom/bust economy of oil fields, the decline in the new industry means people are leaving the area
- Safe Church protocols limit who can show leadership with pastoral care with requirements for record checks, windows required into classrooms, online training, etc. (Minority opinion)
- People spend time on screens instead of in-person activities. Don’t value direct human interaction the way we did before COVID.

Summary of Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 18 individuals, selected by the Diocese to provide a range of voices based on geography, gender, ethnicity and orientation. The participants were, in large part, interviewed online. The interview questions were pre-circulated to allow for reflection. The questions focused on parish life, rather than on the Diocese as a whole, and were organised into four basic themes which are summarised below. A list of those interviewed is found in Appendix A.

Community and Spiritual Assets in a Parish Context

What enables a parish to flourish?

The first set of questions examines the strengths and assets of a parish, focusing on spiritual and human dimensions that contribute to its overall vitality and mission.

These questions also explored what causes the parishes to flourish. Is there a model for others to follow? A “secret ingredient or special sauce”? What follows are the themes arising from this set of questions.

The primary asset is the parish's commitment to **spiritual** growth, pastoral care and community support, which includes actively listening to parish members, praying together, enhancing their faith and commitment to Christianity, and addressing core needs within the church. This engagement is deeply rooted in a shared Christian faith and the desire to extend God's love, demonstrating a strong faith commitment that empowers community outreach. Additionally, there is a deep commitment to the mission of the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, which serves as a significant motivational force for the community. Some parishes also value thoughtful and theological engagement, attracting people from different traditions who seek a space for open-minded exploration.

In terms of **human assets**, parishes boast a diverse and skilled group of individuals, including those with experience on nonprofit boards, academic professionals and individuals with practical skills. This diverse talent pool allows the parish to excel in various areas and contribute to the overall strength of the community. Dedicated clergy and volunteers use their diverse skills to enhance the church's mission. This dedication fosters community and encourages the parish to grow by tapping into various talents and wisdom from its members. A strong lay leadership team is essential for the functioning of rural parishes, especially in the absence of the priest. Key strengths include a dedicated group of parishioners, particularly women, who are deeply involved in church activities and discussions about faith. For instance, the Anglican Church Women (ACW) are often credited with “coffee time" events to foster fellowship and connection among parish members. Members offer each other support during hard times, such as times of

mourning or family crises. Prayer chains and offers of spiritual support are common. Strong leadership and a sense of inspiration and motivation within the congregation contribute to the overall success of the parish. The willingness to invest in paid staff for music ministry and other essential roles demonstrates a commitment to providing quality services, which in turn supports the parish's growth and vibrancy. Overall, the human assets of the parish are characterised by a network of skilled, committed and diverse individuals who contribute to the community's growth and vibrancy.

In some cases, the **physical assets** of the parish, such as its beautiful location and grounds, provide a space for community gatherings, events and activities, enhancing the overall experience for parishioners and visitors. Additionally, the location of the parishes is often central and easy to access.

Parishes value **inclusivity** and welcome individuals with disabilities, 2SLGBTQ+ people and visible minorities, recognising the value of their presence and contributions. Strategies to foster connections between members and engage new participants are vital to overcoming barriers to participation and ensuring that parishes are vibrant places of worship and community service. Further, there is an understanding that while the intention of welcome may be sincere, it is the newcomers (particularly those from marginalised populations) who ultimately decide whether welcome has been received. Not all have experienced welcome and continue to experience ongoing challenges with the acceptance of BIPOC and queer members.

Parishes demonstrate strength in **social support** and community outreach, as evidenced by their food programs, market, breakfast events, seniors' outreach, refugee support and efforts to combat isolation. These initiatives showcase parishes' commitment to serving and supporting the broader community, reflecting a strong sense of social responsibility and engaging in community life. The support of inner-city pastoral ministry and the emphasis on community engagement, such as the Food Bank Ministry and reconciliation efforts, play a significant role in the parishes' flourishing. Community ministry appears to be a point of pride.

Some parishes showed **openness and adaptability**, as seen in their willingness to explore non-traditional approaches and make the most of limited resources. For example, some hold services outside; whereas others use lawn chairs for seating when needed. One operates out of multiple locations, juggling various cultural and theological traditions. This adaptability and resourcefulness contribute to the overall strength of parishes and their ability to navigate challenges effectively.

The parish's openness and willingness to explore beyond traditional Anglican practices is a strength. The dedication and commitment of the parishioners, particularly in the areas of music ministry and pastoral care, contribute to the vitality of the parish.

Leadership is critical to the parish's continued flourishing. Strong leadership not only inspires engagement but also influences the success of various ministries. Clergy need to encourage deeper conversations about faith and provide a safe space for parishioners to explore their spiritual growth.

As the parish grapples with external changes and internal dynamics, it is crucial to engage congregants in conversations about the Church's evolving role and future. By acknowledging the limitations of past models and encouraging experimentation with new initiatives, the parish aims to create a more adaptable framework.

The second set of questions explored how members can grow in their faith, and how this spiritual formation is made evident at the individual and parish levels.

The evidence of people growing in faith can be seen in their increasing engagement with the church community, both on Sunday mornings and beyond. This can manifest in individuals attending community events, volunteering for various ministries, such as reading or prayers, and taking on more responsibilities within the church, such as helping with community dinners or other activities. There might be increased involvement in church ministries and leadership opportunities, such as reading prayers or participating in the altar guild. Additionally, individuals may start attending church more regularly and becoming more involved in various church activities. This increasing engagement is a sign of their deepening spiritual connection and growth in their faith.

While there is recognition of the need for more pathways for spiritual formation, such as Bible studies, attendance and engagement in these activities fluctuate. While many parishioners express a desire for opportunities to deepen their understanding of faith, there are varying levels of participation when such opportunities are offered.

Some members live out their faith through various ministries and community service. These church members are passionate about their involvement in different ministries, both within and outside the parish, and are actively engaged in supporting each other during times of need, such as illness or loss. For example, some parishes reach out to those in need, particularly individuals who have experienced trauma and challenges, and provide support in various forms, including medical and psychological assistance. These parishioners' experiences of hardship and trauma have led them to a deep connection with their faith, and they strive to extend the love of God to others through their community service efforts.

Additionally, the church's leadership is actively involved in nurturing the spiritual growth of its members, with lay leaders exploring discernment processes for ordination and taking on responsibilities in various capacities. Despite challenges and a sense of disconnect at times, there is an ongoing effort to build a sense of community and to encourage greater involvement in spiritual development and ministry work.

Finally, others emphasise that spiritual growth manifests itself most directly in personal stories and actions, rather than in participation in traditional programming. Members express their faith through acts of service, such as helping isolated seniors or supporting one another during difficult times. People show their love of God and others in practical ways on a regular basis.

The third bundle of questions explored how mission and ministry are articulated by parish members and the parish as a whole.

Ministry is defined as the service, empowerment and support provided to individuals and families in the community in order to experience God's love and grace, grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ and impact the world through acts of compassion. This includes activities such as food bank ministry, Indigenous ministry, and support for community projects such as addressing period poverty. It can also involve music ministry, which brings people into church outside of service hours. Additionally, parishes support inner city pastoral ministry, prisoner ministry, mental health support, and other food security initiatives.

Most parishioners can articulate the importance of community ministry, highlighting a commitment to serving both the local community and God. When asked to private examples of ministry in practice, interviewees offered the following examples of active engagement in various servicing ministries:

- Sharing church building/hall space with nonprofits or community partners
- Actively engaging arts and cultural groups to use the space for performing arts
- Offering a community garden

- Church members volunteer at soup kitchens, women's shelters, local "free" cafes, etc.
- Making donations to partnering non-profits or church initiatives

In contrast to ministry, most interviewees had difficulty articulating how their parishes understood their **mission – their purpose.** Outside of discipleship and service-based ministry, there appears to be uncertainty as to mission. Interviewees emphasised the importance of loving God, serving neighbours and fostering an environment of openness and inclusivity in the church. Perhaps, it is this bundle of attributes and activities that summarises mission.

The final set of questions explored the obstacles to parish growth and vitality.

Parishes face several challenges that hinder growth and engagement. Burnout among core members is identified as a significant hindrance to the parish's vitality. One significant barrier is the difficulty in attracting and retaining new members, particularly as demographics shift and older parishioners become less active. As congregations age, many dedicated individuals face health issues or increased responsibilities within their families, limiting their capacity to maintain their previous levels of involvement. There is also a demographic shift where younger members disengage from the church, especially when they reach adolescence, leading to a lack of continuity in membership. Additionally, when a parish is in a transitional period, it is seeking to attract new families while grappling with the limited availability of younger adults who may be balancing career and family commitments.

These obstacles are being addressed through efforts to renew partnerships and connections, offer different types of programs and activities and integrate children into the worship service to create a sense of family time. There is also an acknowledgment of the need to adapt to the changing societal landscape and to find new ways to engage with the community.

Cultural differences between members' backgrounds and that of their Canadian context can contribute to misunderstandings about the role of the church, leading to unmet expectations for social services that the parish may not be equipped to provide. Potential parishioners expect the church to provide extensive services, mirroring social services from their home countries, leading to disappointment when these expectations aren't met.

The obstacles hindering the parish from flourishing include a lack of clearly articulated identity or purpose. One parish is addressing this obstacle by maintaining an open and exploratory approach to Anglicanism, as well as by

acknowledging and providing opportunities to show caring for each other to the best of their abilities.

In contrast, not all churches are community-based. The geographic dispersion of congregation members can create logistical challenges, with limited church attendance due to transportation and parking costs, making attendance feel burdensome.

Additionally, financial constraints remain firm obstacles. Financial concerns impede both individual and church growth, as in certain parishes many parishioners work multiple jobs that afford them little time or financial resources to contribute to the church. Similarly, parishes working in the poorest parts of the diocese feel they require the greatest financial support to achieve their mission.

There is a recognition that community, ministry-based initiatives and partnerships do not necessarily reap the intended rewards. Some churches have dedicated Indigenous ministries, participate in the Orange Shirt Walk and include land acknowledgements to demonstrate their commitment to reconciliation and cultural awareness. In spite of their efforts, the churches acknowledge that these initiatives have not translated into increased attendance. The same is also true for churches that rent to daycares and other organisations. These partnership activities improve the visibility of the churches and represent genuine ministry-related activity, but do not address the membership challenge. Unless new approaches are tried, this trend will likely continue. (Although not addressed directly, this area touches upon the lack of agreed-upon measures for determining success. How is ministry to be evaluated? What outcomes are worth the effort? Why?)

Parishes have attempted to address these obstacles in various ways. For example, they have engaged in social support initiatives, such as partnering with organisations like Boyle Street for space usage and kitchen access. Some have also focused on Indigenous ministry and have a significant Indigenous presence in their Sunday school. Other parishes have organised community events in their ethnic communities, such as a community barbecue and sports activities, to engage families and children, regardless of their affiliation with the church. A few interviewees mentioned the importance of resurrecting partnerships for campus ministry and renewing interfaith connections to engage young adults.

Finally, attempts to try new ways of working are inherently challenging, as new models require new approaches to leadership, governance, accountability and operations. These are not easy transitions as they upend the traditional role of vestry, redefine what constitutes prayer and potentially blur the lines between Christian ministry and social services. Opposition to power sharing, Indigenous ways of worshipping and/or the integration of ministry with mission at a deep level, may prevent the expansion of new collaborative models.

Special Section of Models for Clergy

Almost all interviewees touched on the importance of leadership within the clergy, with a focus on the qualities and impacts of priests. The relationship between clergy and the congregation, as well as the lack of resources available to support clergy, were a recurring theme.

The role of the priest is multi-faceted and includes leading worship services, providing pastoral care and serving as a spiritual leader within the congregation. The priest is responsible for reading the gospel, elucidating its meaning and functioning as a leader within the church community. Additionally, the priest plays a role in articulating the mission and purpose of the parish, working in consultation with the congregation and the wider community to ensure that worship is meaningful and inclusive. The priest also supports the congregation during times of difficulty, such as illness or death, and provides spiritual guidance and support. Furthermore, the priest may be involved in community outreach and engagement, fostering relationships and offering hospitality to the wider community. The traditional Anglican Church model is priest-reliant/dependent.

The interviews provided insight into different approaches to the role of clergy. One is the shared clergy model, where a priest may serve multiple parishes and be spread thin in terms of time and resources. This model raises questions about whether having a part-time priest, "from away," is better than having no clergy at all, whether it can truly help parishes thrive, or if it is simply a survival mode approach. The traditional model of a priest serving multiple churches is similar to the practices of the 20th century where a priest would travel between towns to conduct worship. This “new” shared clergy model reflects a return to a previous way of operating, with an emphasis on adaptability and flexibility in terms of when and how worship is conducted. It allows for and/or requires greater leadership from laypeople.

At the other extreme, is the adulation of, and heavy reliance on, a highly skilled full-time clergy. This leaves parishes very vulnerable to turnover of clergy, particularly where the spouse is also heavily involved in parish life. There appears to be a potent (and equally unrealistic) hope that the recruitment of young, dynamic priests who can breathe new life into parishes, live in smaller communities, and live on less than a full-time salary, can be realised. More energetic, high-functioning priests are the silver bullet that will solve parish problems. While the love of and regard for priests is palpable, it is also acknowledged that the “cult of the priest” is likely unhealthy and makes it difficult to establish a culture and practice where the priest is less of a quarterback and more of a coach.

This “middle ground” of an empowered congregation, ideally led by stable, responsive clergy appears to be difficult to obtain and sustain. It likely requires a critical mass of members, as well as a culture of innovation, supplemented by

competent lay leadership. What does an empowered parish look like? An empowered parish is described as one where the lay leadership is strong and robust, with a sense of collegiality between clergy and lay people. In such a parish, the leadership is empowered to take on responsibilities, such as writing liturgies and sermons, and is actively involved in decision-making processes. An empowered parish also fosters a sense of openness and exploration, allowing for non-traditional approaches and a willingness to make things work with the resources available. Additionally, an empowered parish is one where the clergy and the parish grow together, with the clergy overseeing and supporting the existing ministry, rather than coming in and being "in charge."

Some conversations touched on the need for better policies and procedures to support clergy and enable them to feel empowered in their roles. The idea of more robust administrative support, potentially centralised at the Diocesan level, was suggested as one option to provide support to parishes and clergy.

Special Section on the Importance of Church Buildings

While the church is a congregation of believers, there is tremendous emotional and spiritual (in some cases intergenerational) attachment to church buildings. Some of these can feel like millstones around the necks of their members, while other church buildings serve as community hubs, providing space for various groups and activities, as well as offering Christian sanctuary. Several interviewees felt that their buildings were the "special sauce" that allowed them to flourish. By virtue of their location, they were able to offer place-based community ministry. In these cases, the church buildings are places where outreach and community engagement take place, allowing the congregation to open their doors to the wider community. The buildings also play a role in providing essential services, such as a daycare and foodbank space, and hosting various groups and events, thereby showcasing the church's vital role in serving the needs of the community.

The church grounds, including the lawn and gardens, can be used as meeting spaces for community events, such as a summer concert series and community meals. Gardens can provide a space for people to gather and socialise, contributing to fellowship within the parish. The physical location enables the church to carry out its mission and purpose, providing a space for worship, gathering, the celebration of culture and community support.

Special Section on the Importance of Children

Children are vitally important to the church, as they are the future of the parishes. Despite the lack of prospective intergenerational turnover, few interviewees spoke to this issue or offered comments about how to turn the tide. One interviewee highlighted the challenges faced by families with multiple children and various

activities, indicating that the church recognises the importance of family life and the difficulties that come with raising children. Another spoke of how her parish has made efforts to create a family-friendly space and provide activities for children, such as hiring someone for children's ministry, even if no children attend for a certain period. One other person suggested that if the church values the presence and wellbeing of children within the parish, it must heavily invest in children's ministry. This must become an area of strategic focus, hiring and funding if Anglican churches are to survive to the next generation's leadership.

Special Section on Relationships within the Diocese

There appears to be a consistent conflation of the terms Diocese and Synod. The Diocese is the union of the parishes, whereas the Synod is the leadership and administration of that union. Often when people speak of the Diocese, they are referring to the Synod Office and leadership.

A range of (unsolicited) opinions about the Synod Office and the Diocese as a whole were shared. In a few instances, members openly stated how greatly they valued their relationships with the Diocese, feeling seen and supported by clergy and the Bishop. This sentiment was most explicitly shared among "ethnic" and Indigenous congregations which have been seen, acknowledged and supported into parish-hood. In one instance, a parish that operates strictly on volunteer efforts (including their priest) is able to access free worship space, which is crucial for their operation and fosters a sense of community within the greater Diocese. Other congregations speak of engagement with the greater Diocesan community, particularly through joint worship services. This has helped bridge cultural divides and allowed for shared musical and cultural experiences. Finally, Diocesan support has allowed one Indigenous parish, that has been overlooked and neglected for more than 30 years, to receive paid lay leadership support and work towards rebuilding a formal congregation. *"The Diocese hasn't given up on us."*

In other instances, the Diocese has been named as a threat. Examples of negative comments in this vein include the following:

- Too much focus on a few hot issues, instead of faith and Christ first
- Diocese is not open to new people; cliquey
- Diocese not always welcoming of diversity of thought and viewpoints
- Too top-down and insensitive to local conditions
- Lack of consistent communication with the Diocese
- Financial commitments to the Diocese are a threat to parish viability (large apportionment)
- Discord with the Diocese over same-sex marriages
- Connection with the Diocese — don't have "a seat at the table"
- Lack of theological diversity in the Diocese

- Lack of sufficient financial support from the Diocese to make the next step to becoming a parish
- Diocese's voice and leadership are missing except through newsletters
- Don't get a lot of support from the Diocese
- Diocese requires us to follow the lectionary, so preaching doesn't fit the needs of the congregation
- Historically, the Diocese has overruled the wishes of the parish and its stated desire to close
- Diocese has unrealistic expectations of our parish
- Too much focus from the Diocese on a few hot issues, instead of faith and Christ first (focus on issues vs. spiritual growth)

Opportunities for Diocesan cooperation include the following:

- Greater connection to the Diocese for payroll, insurance and help with finding an assistant rector
- Need to build better relations with other churches and the Diocese
- Work with other parishes to celebrate diversity and inclusion throughout the Diocese
- Want direction from the Diocese re: "common cup" (minority opinion)
- Build a relationship with the Diocese to commit to a realistic operating vision of our parish

SECTION 4: Concluding Observations

More *in* Common than Not

The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing parishes are the same whether the parishes are in rural or urban settings. Love of God, and worship in community remain the cornerstones of parish life, while the challenges of aging congregations, financial pressures and burnout rates remain constant. Comparisons are not accurately made on a simple urban vs. rural basis. Smaller parishes experience the same challenges as larger ones, albeit on a different scale. Rural parishioners tithe more per capita than their urban brethren. They are tackling the same challenges but with fewer human and financial resources. The big-picture Diocesan struggle is a common one.

Love and Dedication are Palpable

The dedication of lifelong members to their respective Anglican parishes is palpable. The faithfulness and resoluteness of congregants and priests remain clear. So many elderly women are holding their church communities together despite declining numbers and increased expenses. Clearly bound by a deep love of God and each other, the members are doing everything they can to keep their church doors open and keep Christ at the center of their lives. "Small but mighty" is a common refrain. It is unclear whether subsequent generations have the same grit and determination.

Lack of Money is Not the Problem, Lack of Intergenerational Turnover Is

While it is tempting to declare that a lack of funds is central to the challenges facing the parish, this engagement process would suggest otherwise. It is people power (overwhelmingly unpaid) that is the gear that turns the wheel. The congregants determine the ability to hold worship services (particularly, when even part-time clergy are not available), pay for the upkeep of the church building and staff, volunteer for mission/ministry services in the community and take on all the other related duties associated with parish life. At the heart of the challenge is the lack of intergenerational turnover. Simply chasing more revenue, through various earned income strategies, is unlikely to solve this problem.

Clear-headedness

Members were overwhelmingly clear-headed and practical when sharing their challenges and opportunities. Honesty and level-headedness prevailed when people described the struggles of their parishes. There was no sugarcoating or denying the facts. Hard truths were named, even ones that spoke to Anglican culture (somewhat hierarchical, bound to tradition, reluctant to change and strongly

disinclined to self-promotion.) This stoic, good-humoured approach will stand members in good stead as they approach the second, action-oriented stage.

Tension Regarding Self-direction and Leadership

There is a tension between parishes wanting to chart their own destinies ("we are paying for everything, so as long as we can pay, we will make it work"), to a desire for the Bishop to tell them what to do; to be clear on the path forward and get people on board. Some parishes have already declared their intentions. For example, some are asking to close their doors, while others are openly pursuing mergers with others. Yet, others are desperately hoping for additional support to expand their already thriving ministries. This tension between parish empowerment and centralised leadership is echoed in the previous section. There is an almost unanimous appetite for moving towards action, even if coupled with some trepidation.

Health Status Metaphor

There might be several apt metaphors to help illustrate the current wellbeing of the Diocese. None of the metaphors are without their drawbacks. After some debate, the consultant decided to draw upon a health metaphor. Using this approach, parishes can be diagnosed based on their health status.

Why this metaphor? It was not uncommon for members to make statements such as, "we are not dead yet," or "the writing is on the wall." It is unclear what critical mass of members is required for a parish to be sustainable. Some very small congregations are determined to continue until such time as their members age/die out, funds dry up, and/or numbers are insufficient to allow for the functioning of a parish. With no further action, time will force these parish closures in the short term. There is a clear-headed understanding of this trajectory, as expressed by several congregations. Closure would come as a relief. Several parishes are nearing their end. Members talk about being on "life support."

Some parishes are at the end stage of life and are in palliative care. One might say they are "actively dying." As a guestimate, 33 percent of parishes fall into this category. The legacies of these parishes, people and buildings (including the maintenance of cemeteries) would have to be carefully defined to honour the traditions and memories of these sacred spaces. It is recognised that in some cases, their closures would end the presence of the Anglican church in smaller Alberta communities. It must be emphasised that the palliative phase is full of important spiritual and practical work. It is not about withdrawing care, but rather providing all the support needed for a lasting legacy and a good death.

Other parishes are experiencing chronic health issues which will result in their demise in the medium term if drastic health measures are not taken. To get a new

lease on life, several key lifestyle changes will have to be made. Investment into children's ministry and next-generation leadership along with the consolidation of parishes to allow for full-time clergy and support of mission work (both from human and financial resources' points of view) will be required. Tempting solutions, such as joining forces with other ailing, aging, mainstream churches with small memberships is only delaying the inevitable. Partnerships with other, larger congregations, nonprofit or mission-aligned organisations, or new partnerships with BIPOC populations with the potential to grow, might be sufficient to chart a new path. Again, strictly as a guestimate, 42 percent of parishes fall into this category. They are large enough to survive, but it is unclear if they are big enough to thrive. If parishes that fall into this group can be consolidated to create more regional "hubs" or "power centres," then this would dramatically improve their chances in the longer term. The funds that would be realised from the sale of some properties could fund expanded clergy positions, address any deferred maintenance on buildings and fuel new ministries.

The final group of parishes, approximately 25 percent, are in good health and/or thriving. They have an attendance of more than 80 people on a given Sunday, have annual revenues of over $200,000, and are experiencing a rebirth after COVID-19. Most have children's ministries in place, and all have at least one cleric. This subgroup is not immune to the same threats and weaknesses of other parishes, but it has the bandwidth to address them. Perhaps with the sale of properties and the mergers of parishes, apportionment rates could decline for these remaining parishes. This policy change might free them up to grow into their fullest and best selves.

Promising Paths

There are some promising paths or directions for moving forward, models that speak to the human resource challenges and increase the likelihood of sustainability into the next generation. These approaches, as listed below, are already in place in some congregations and could be expanded upon elsewhere.

- Empowered congregations that have redefined the role and reliance on clergy
- The Lodgepole Communitas which has placed two parishes, other denominations, Indigenous organisations, and social service agencies under one umbrella. There are other emerging contexts where this approach is also under development
- Policies and support for congregations that have invested in children's ministry and whose child/youth numbers are growing
- Emerging congregations (largely from BIPOC communities) that have the potential to tap into large numbers of youth and expand to meet greater needs and provide more mission and ministry

Conclusion

In conclusion, this phase of research was intended to support the next phase of work – discernment and decision-making regarding the future of the Diocese. By capturing both micro and macro strengths and liabilities, volunteers and paid leaders will be better equipped to identify future implications and generate practical solutions going forward. There are strong assets upon which to build: spiritual dedication, talented people, land and buildings, commitment to community service, and diversity/inclusion. Determining how these can best be levered in a dynamic, sustainable future is the next challenge.

This is best summed up by a member who stated, *"We have a wonderful vibrant growing parish. We are eager to know God more and serve others well. We need to learn to do things differently in order for the church to survive and thrive in the next generations."*

APPENDIX A: List of Interviewees

- Akon Akon
- Alex Meek
- Andreas Sigrist
- Barb Burrows
- Carol Blair
- Chelsy Bouwman
- Clare Stewart
- Danielle Key
- Imai Welch
- Jamie Hurlburt
- Jonathan Crane
- Jordan Ware
- Kevin Kraglund
- Laureta Blondin
- Scott Belamisca
- Sue Oliver
- Travis Enright
- Yovella Misrahii