

*An open letter on the results of the April 15<sup>th</sup> town hall meeting on the future of worship at St. Michael's Episcopal Church*

May 1, 2018

Dear St. Michael's family,

I want to thank everyone who attended our April 15<sup>th</sup> town hall meeting on worship. Over ninety parishioners attended the meeting, and the diversity of St. Michael's was well represented with one key exception: few parents with young kids were able to attend. As a result, a google survey was sent to several families with young kids the week after the town hall meeting. What follows is a summary of the key points that emerged from the input I received from the town hall meeting and the google surveys that were returned. As this is a *summary* of key insights and opinions expressed, these points are not comprehensive, nor does it cover every opinion that was expressed. However, I do believe that this summary captures the essence of the feedback I received around St. Michael's values, hopes, and preferences for the future of worship.

Key Strengths

The most encouraging insights that emerged from the town hall meetings related to the many communal strengths we can build on as we contemplate the future of worship. Too many strengths were listed to name, but at the top of the list I noted a beautiful worship space, a variety of musical style and ability, a warm and welcoming community, talented and passionate musical leaders, and a non-judgmental community that is open and accepting of theological difference.

Shared values & areas of consensus

A clear sense of St. Michael's values also emerged from these town hall meetings. As a whole, I heard you say you want:

- Children and youth more involved and fully integrated in Sunday morning worship at St. Michael's. We want more children and youth in church, and we want them in a leadership role (serving as acolytes, greeters, readers, Eucharistic ministers, etc.).
- Growth. Attracting new families emerged as a shared value. We are willing to sacrifice *some* of our wants to meet this goal.
- A full church. There is more energy when the sanctuary is full. We also love being together.
- Liturgical and musical diversity. Many referenced St. Michael's history with respect to this point. Liturgical diversity is not just a preference, but also part of St. Michael's DNA and history.
- Worship that works for young families. The vast majority of people acknowledged that families with young children have challenges that need to be weighed and prioritized.
- An Episcopal worship service. The "integrity" of the service needs to be safeguarded.

In other areas, a shared value did *not* emerge. I note the following areas as places where people hold different values.

- Most people were willing to sacrifice personal worship preferences if it might lead to greater attendance. However, this was not true for all.
- People were about evenly split as to whether or not worship should exceed 1-hour. Most, however, valued beginning the worship service on time.
- Most people preferred two principal services, at least as an ideal. Some, however, found the 10:00 a.m. service to be working quite well for our community.
- Musical consistency. Most people prefer one musical style over the other (contemporary *or* traditional). A small minority enjoy blended worship.

I also heard you express the following areas that need attention and work, i.e. areas that need improvement.

- Acoustics and sound. Among other things, attention needs to be given to items such as speaker and sound board placement, speaker and mic volumes, set up and spacing, and other items that impact the acoustics of the worship space.
- Pew sheet / bulletin. We need to improve consistency, format, accessibility, and ease of use.
- More training and clarity of expectations needs to be offered to acolytes, greeters, and ushers.
- Congregational singing. When new music is introduced, people need to be taught how to sing it. Familiar hymn tunes are preferred. Attention needs to be given on the best way to “draw” the congregation into more participation with respect to singing.

### Values in Tension

Like so much of life, the town hall meetings revealed areas where our values are in tension, or perhaps even conflict (at least at the present moment). Examples include:

- We want children and youth more involved in worship *and* we want them to be well behaved so as not to disturb the reverence of the worship experience.
- We want to safeguard the intimacy we feel as a community *and* we want to grow numerically and attract new families.
- We want a full church, consistency with respect to musical style, and to honor our musical diversity all at the same time.
- We want to claim our heritage as a laid-back community (as long as we begin on time and the acolytes are properly trained).

## Summary

All in all, I am deeply happy with the results of the town hall meetings. I sense that we are growing in clarity about God's emerging future for St. Michael's, and it is clear that we genuinely love each other and that we trust God with any changes that may lie in our future.

The next step is for me to make sure that I heard you accurately. *I read everyone's written feedback multiple times in preparing this written summary.* This report obviously excludes more than it includes, which is necessary when summarizing so much data. However, I do believe that this captures the most important patterns I detected in the feedback. Please email me at [jnewton@st-michaels.org](mailto:jnewton@st-michaels.org) by May 6<sup>th</sup> if you feel that I missed something important.

My hope is to discern a way forward that honors our shared vision and common goals. Although it is unlikely that my decision will align with everyone's preference, I will be clear about the values guiding my decision and I will always remain available to meet pastorally 1-on-1 with anyone struggling with our chosen way forward.

If any worship changes are discerned, it is highly unlikely that they will be implemented before August.

Thank you for the gift and privilege of being your rector. It is a sacred trust and I do not take it lightly. I am grateful to journey with you as we step into God's emerging future together.

Grace and Peace,

The Rev. John Newton