



Creative \* Sustainable \* Digital \* Ministry

## St. Benedict's Table 2020-21 Congregational Gather Final Summary, Report, and Vocation Statement

### 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

This was the overall question of the Advent 2020 retreat series with St. Ben's congregation, four Zoom meetings that followed videos with the themes of *Waiting*, *Transforming*, *Expecting*, and *Dreaming*. The following insights and Vocation Statement were prepared after the conversations and delivered to St. Ben's leadership in early 2021...

### Insights

St. Benedict's Table has an *amazing* depth of shared commitment, vision, affection and community. The sense that you share the same story is very evident, and more rare than you may know.

The things that draw members in and keep them engaged are also shared: beautiful, central liturgy; a sense of 'come as you are, do what

you want (even if it's nothing)'; a true sense of community; a gentle spirit of caring and creativity.

There is great value placed on being 'different' - not for its own sake, but for the sake of finding and keeping a deep connection with God, even with the challenges of being an organization that needs structure and support.

St. Ben's seems to have found a balance between simply 'being' with God and one another, and also doing what needs to be done to make liturgy and community happen for others.

Paradox is in your very nature, and you seem to thrive on it.

And...

There is a sense of the inevitability of change, and some anxiety with it. Of course the pandemic has shaped so much of this, but Jamie's eventual retirement is also very much present, even if it is not spoken of easily.

Beyond these events, there is also the sense of St. Ben's as a 'start up', and 16 years later, the inevitable reckoning of what comes next - and a bit of a reluctance to do this reckoning.

Being present with St. Ben's put me in mind of Bruce Tuckman's stages of development: *Forming*, *Storming*, *Norming*, and *Transforming*.

Given your own descriptions of being good at waiting, and organic growth and organization, I think you've been in the 'Forming' stage for almost all of your first 16 years.

You have been gradually learning about your mission and one another,

following naturally into the rhythm of who you are, sharing an easy sense of what you are doing and how you are doing it. Roles are not entirely fixed and people are encouraged to do and be whatever they want. Creativity is at a premium, also the idea that no one is asked for much - they contribute only as they feel called. In short, it's the 'start up' culture.

Which means it may be time to get ready for a storm!

'Storming' may sound daunting, but it doesn't have to be anxiety-producing. It's a time when roles, processes, goals and visions become more set and settled. When things become less organic and more organized. In short, it's time for more clarity and intentionality, and it can be a time of conflict.

Even this does not have to be feared!

"Conflict" means 'to strike together', and though this may bring sparks, it also brings heat and light.

So far, your growth and direction feel organic, but this may just be because the structure, mission, and administration are not completely spelled out - not in any intentional way, but because you have not yet been at the place where it was required. Some members mentioned not feeling completely comfortable that they know how things *should* be done according to denominational procedure. I think this also hints at the idea that they don't feel completely comfortable offering suggestions/guidance for how they would like to see things organized, because they are not sure they are invited to do that, or what avenues there are for it.

St. Ben's may now be in the place to spell out the process - for leadership, direction, definition, organization, it may be time to lean into

the 'storming' phase of your growth. It may be time to risk having conflicting ideas and visions, and trusting one another - and God - to walk through them to more clarity.

## Vocation Statement

St. Benedict's Table has a very strong identity, community, and commitment to serving God and your neighbors. You may be called now to define this further - how you share a vision, faith practices, the organizational work of the church - even risking the fact that you come from different places, with different ideas.

## Follow up Meeting

After receiving the initial report and having time to consider it, the congregation met again on Zoom on May 27, 2021. At this meeting they considered four questions, listed here along with the summary of comments...

1. Our identity as a congregation has always made room for people who are seeking a place of respite, many of whom engage us as a "second church home" or a transitional resting place. How do we move forward when one of the key elements in our identity is that it is okay *not* to invest in the life of the community?
  - It's about naming who we are and our values
  - Does this part of our identity actually 'liberate' us from being a 'programmatic' church?
  - Understanding what it means to be an advocate for others' leadership

- Taking on an identity that is fluid
2. In any church plant, the personality and leadership of the founding pastor is typically linked to the identity, vision, and priorities of the congregation. With the prospect of Jamie's retirement coming in the next three to five years, what steps might we need to take to prepare for a transition into a new chapter in the life of Saint Benedict's Table?
- We were mentally prepared for Jamie to leave before, now we feel ok
  - Clone a younger Jamie!
  - We have the advantage of being able to plan for it/around it
  - What is St. Ben's without Jamie?  
Conversation would be helpful - what is the process?
  - Expand the concept - 'who does the church belong to?'
  - The one person we are tied to is Jesus - not Jaimie!
  - How have other congregations dealt with founding pastors leaving?
  - Jamie is not a 'lame duck'
  - Others also carry the leadership role
  - A strategic look at our overall vision (as we are currently doing) will help us when it is time to seek Jamie's successor
3. Drawing on Bruce Tuckman's stages of development - Forming, Storming, Norming, and Transforming - Cathie has suggested that we have been in the Forming stage for our entire sixteen-year history, and that we might need to get ready for a storm.. In what areas do we anticipate the potential for conflict, and how might we position ourselves to navigate those in a way that avoids the trap of avoidance?

- 'Avoid the trap of avoidance' - interesting phrase
- Areas of conflict: leadership alignment, Anglican vs. congregational organizational model, being willing to invest in the community
- Maybe more opportunity for conversation?
- We may have to move from 'outsider' status to normalizing the organization
- 'Second church' people not as invested; people move on if they don't like something
- We don't have to have consensus
- Some precedent with past conflict/disagreement

4. As we contemplate a return to gathered worship and other in-person events and programs in the coming months, what do we need to do to welcome people back, open the doors to new people, and attend to those who have lost momentum or slipped through the cracks? How, in other words, do we plan for the church congregation that will be, not the one that we knew in pre-pandemic times?

- A longing to return, and anxiety about what it will be like
- A grieving process
- We need to plan for a congregation not defined by 'bums in the pews'
- We can't welcome people *back*, we have to welcome people *forward*

## Final thoughts

St. Benedict's Table seems ready for the challenges before you! The follow up conversation was relatively brief, but filled with thoughtful insights and reflections.

It seems even more clear that the issues before you are reflected in the questions and answers you provided:

1. Your mission/vocational identity
2. Jamie's eventual retirement and the process leading up to and after it
3. Openness to change and new direction, and willingness to engage in the work of getting there
4. Returning to in-person worship (eventually) and the changes to the congregation brought about by the pandemic

St. Ben's seems ready and even eager to take on all of these issues, even with the possibility of conflict ('storming'). There is a high degree of confidence that the community has the skills and tools to work through the interlocking challenges before you with grace.

There does seem to be a need for *process* -for perhaps spelling out what you see as the road ahead on these four fronts, and what the major parts might look like (eg. 'what is the process for deciding our organizational structure going forward?', 'what is the process for continued conversation and discernment?').

With this need, maybe also a clearer sense of the overall process of authority and decision-making within the congregation is needed. Who ultimately makes these decisions, and how? (and when?)

Perhaps, then, the first question before you really is organizational, and from there you will be able to plot the course as you are called into engaging the rest of the questions before you.

- Submitted by the Rev. Catherine Caimano (Free Range Priest), June 1, 2021