

Discernment, Vision and Participation at Grace:

*What we have heard so far and
What we wonder for the future*

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A working-document



Introduction:

For over three months, we have shared in many intentional conversations with one another. With our ongoing GWAG Listening Circles, we have focused on key aspects of the parish's ministries. With vestry conversations, we have re-imagined ways of envisioning our leadership. In the Sunday Forum, we have reflected on foundational aspects of our Christian identity. And, in countless informal yet invaluable conversations, we have begun to wonder together what God may have in store for us as Grace Parish.

Some have asked what will come of these conversations, and it is good to take time to summarize what we have envisioned – and what we have heard.

I offer this document as a way for us to focus our discernment even further, as well as begin to envision ways we can embody the richness we have envisioned together, as we continue to listen to the Spirit's call upon our lives.

I have structured the document in three sections.

Section One summarizes the key insights gained during our GWAG conversations, highlighting the rich consensus that emerged in our time together.

Section Two describes new ways the vestry is envisioning its leadership role, having itself participated in the ongoing conversations. The vestry's leadership initiative is key for our parish as we enter more deeply into this new space in our life together.

Section Three lays out a few key "wonderings," ideas and possibilities we can explore, having gathered the insights of the community. The richness of this section is that it begins to lay out ways in which we can embody our discernment, as we seek to participate further in God's Mission at Grace Church.

We can now begin to lay out a framework for further development, mindful of our opportunity to further practice our faith, stretching into the intentional use of the *language of the Christian Tradition* that invites us to explore a more *contemplative, prayer-rooted* space. We are moving beyond a mere program-maintenance model into a *risk-taking, Spirit-oriented, Christ-focused community formation endeavor*.

Section One: Insights from the GWAG Listening Circles

Our GWAG sessions have provided the parish with an enormous amount of reflective responses. And, more than that, they have offered the parish community a space in which we have *experienced* what it means to form a community based on appreciation, listening, prayer and intentional reflection.

Over the past three months, we have explored together key aspects of our parish's common life, specifically focusing on the following areas of ministry and faith:

We began with prayer because prayer reminds of us our own grounding in Christ consciousness, in our awareness of, as the saying goes, of "who we are and whose we are." Each of the focus areas itself encompasses a wide variety of ministry opportunities, and each of these focus areas is led by amazing, gifted and dedicated parishioners.

The topics and guiding questions were as follows:

Reflections on Prayer

What have been your most prayerful experiences at Grace Parish?

Reflections on Children and Youth

When you reflect on the spiritual growth of children and youth at Grace, what do you feel are the essential components of their formation?

And, linked with that, how could Grace best support and nurture them?

Reflections on Worship

What do you enjoy most about worship? How does this speak to or move you?

Describe your best experiences of worship and music at Grace

How can we foster or enrich our connections to one another and to God through worship and music? (Think imaginatively and go deep here!)

Reflections on Spiritual Formation

Describe your best experiences of adult formation at Grace.

What kinds of experiences (retreats, speakers, book studies, other events) would you like to have as a part of spiritual formation in the future?

How does prayer (as a subject or a process, or both) fit into what we envision as the future of a vibrant Christian Formation program?

Reflections on Outreach

When you reflect on your life at Grace – and your wider life – what do you feel is the purpose of Outreach?

And, linked with that, what image do you have for ways we can embrace “the other” in our community?

Reflections on Pastoral Care

When you reflect on your life's experiences, how do you envision Grace living out Jesus' commandment to love others as we love ourselves?

And, linked with that, what image do you have for ways we all can be a nurturing presence in one another's lives?

We received about 120 pages of handwritten notes, and these have been organized and are in a binder in the reception area. They are available at any time for anyone to explore!

What I want to invite us to consider now is that we can explore each of these areas much more intentionally now that we have *attuned* ourselves to what the Spirit might be saying to Grace Church. We have the opportunity to delve more deeply into ways we each are being invited to share our gifts and strengths with the parish and the wider community.

The following is a condensed review of the many responses:

What we have learned about ourselves through the Listening Circles

Outreach

We embrace "the other" in our community,

We provide loving kindness in our community,

We aid community groups that serve the message of Christ,

We do without expecting in return,

We connect humanity. We are all in this together.

We help the less fortunate spiritually,

We meet community needs: Hunger, Housing, Clothing, Medical Care,

We build and strengthen our Grace family when needed assistance is provided to a member.

Pastoral Care

We become more aware of the needs of others while respecting the privacy around those needs,

We draw our caring circle wider,

We know people are praying and caring for us when needed,

We provide a path to attend and notice one another,

We show appreciation for others and what they contribute,

We learn how to communicate in a loving and caring way,

We use a loving language,

We see Christ in others and are Christ to others,

We practice program vs. presence.

Children and Youth Formation

We serve others, fostering our connection with God, showing love for each other,

We gain a sense of family, knowing friends are there when you need them,

We appreciate liturgy and meaningful practices (compline, worship, periods of silence),

We have a sense of communion as presence of God in celebration and challenges,

We experience and relate to God by learning about other faiths and how others connect to God,

We appreciate working with and speaking to all parish members,

We experience the grace of God through nature,

We become spiritually mature, making room for doubt, realizing we do not have to have all the answers.

Adult Spiritual Formation and Worship

We draw on “our total Being: mind, language, spirit, and body” through worship,

We find new ways to nourish and feed us,

We foster a deeper sense of community by exploring ways of fellowship with no strict separation,

We seek ways to find balance in our lives (retreats, centering prayer),

We explore types of prayer,

We express ourselves by participating in our formation and worship,

We look for ways to form “circles” and ways to share intentional community,

We desire to expand our knowledge and faith through travel for study and fellowship,

We reflect together on “What is the purpose of being in church?”

Through the Listening Circles we have experienced the sense of communion, bringing our spiritual growth and community together, by sharing:

Service to others

Awareness

Conversation

Appreciation

Action

Respect for difference

Growth

Meaningful practices

Fellowship

Liturgy

Loving kindness

Relationships

Sense of family & friends

Experience

Fostering

Compassion & care

Section Two: New Visioning with Vestry Leadership

The vestry is much more than a “simple” board of the organization that is Grace Church. It is a group of twelve dedicated individuals who have been selected by the parish community, through its *discernment*, to help guide the entire parish in its participation with God’s Mission.

While the vestry has specific responsibilities regarding the financial health and stewardship of the parish, as well as providing a space for the worship of God, its leadership role is not constricted. The vestry has an invaluable opportunity to embody *spiritual leadership* within a parish community. The twelve people who sit on the vestry meet monthly, and their combined wisdom and ongoing prayerful discernment help the rector and the staff continue in the cultivation of a prayerful space that fosters the spiritual growth and pastoral support of the amazing community that is Grace Church.

For the past three months, since the Annual Meeting, the vestry has sought to imagine fresh ways it can embody such a practice of spiritual leadership.

I am inviting the vestry itself to focus on three “Ministry Clusters” within the parish. They have already restructured themselves in some areas in ways that will make it more conducive to embody the discernment laid out in the above reflection on GWAG.

- **The Parish Formation Cluster**

In the group, Becky Whitmire, Senior Warden; Cheryl Kelley, Vestry Liaison for Spiritual Growth; and Fr. Stuart will work with Teddy Ivey, the Director of Youth Ministries, and Melanie Couch, the Director of Children’s Ministries, to envision ways we can further integrate the spiritual formation and Christian education of the parish. As well, we will draw on the wisdom of the Adult Formation Committee, the Youth Leaders, as well as the Children’s Ministries Committee – all of whom share their gifts with the parish in extraordinary ways!

There was a constant refrain in our Listening Circles that demonstrated the parish wants to find ways to foster inter-generational formation opportunities.

Also, we see the need to find a way to be more intentional about the transitional years people experience in their lives, i.e., moving from children to youth, youth to college, college to early adulthood, etc. It is essential that we are aware of the need for intentional formation support and nurture opportunities as people continue to grow and practice their faith.

- **The Newcomer/Parish Life and Involvement Cluster**

It has become clear to the vestry that we have the opportunity to delve more deeply into ways in which we invite everyone in the parish to share of themselves. This involvement begins when someone first comes to visit Grace Church, and it continues throughout a person's life as they continue to share of themselves, with what is commonly referred to as "time, talent, and treasure." To that end, this group consists of Joey West, the Vestry Liaison for Newcomers; Susan Trotter and Bill Kantola, Vestry Liaisons for Parish Life & Involvement; and George Henderson, Vestry Liaison for Stewardship.

Stewardship is about much more than money; indeed, having it focus solely on money is to make it too easy! Rather, stewardship is about the holistic practice of one's faith, leaning into what we understand as a life rooted in the *prayer of oblation – the giving of one's entire self to God, to be used by God and available to the entire community of faith.*

What we are speaking of is a journey: a journey from being a newcomer at Grace Church to being someone who begins to understand that they are invited by the Spirit to share of themselves.

This cluster will soon begin many new initiatives at Grace Church, bringing together amazingly gifted individuals who want to find new ways of showing *hospitality and spiritual encouragement.*

- **The Ministries of Compassion Cluster**

This particular cluster finds its origin in the rich conversations of the GWAG Listening Circles that focused on Outreach and Pastoral Care.

How do we embody Christ's love in the world around us? As we reflected together, it became clear to the entire group that, at its heart, both Outreach and Pastoral Care are, in essence, about Compassion. How do we show compassion to our brother and sisters at Grace who are in need? How do we show compassion to those in the wider Gainesville community? How do we show compassion to those in need around the world?

Kathie Futrell is our Vestry Liaison, and Julia Greene is our Pastoral Care Liaison. Together, with the extremely gifted members of both the Outreach and Pastoral Care Committees, this particular cluster invites the entire parish to wonder what it might mean to share of ourselves.

**As well, please know that the Vestry is going into retreat on May 2 and 3, to continue our visioning and *mutual discernment*, so the conversation continues.

Section Three: Where do we go from here? Where are we being led?

I want to use this section to highlight a few opportunities for us as a parish to explore together, drawing on the richness of Sections One and Two.

Here's what I wonder: what if we take what we have discerned, as noted above, as well as the new ways of envisioning leadership, and begin to lay out a framework for the rest of 2014? What if we spend the Summer and Fall continuing to develop frameworks, share conversations, and embark on new spaces for ministry? To put a fine point on it, what if we use the rest of 2014 as a time to practice a deeper space of *Christian Discipleship*?

We can then use the Annual Meeting in January of 2015 as a time to both look what we have done in 2014 as well as gauge more clearly what 2015 might have in store.

The question has been raised in various settings as to how we can gauge what we have 'accomplished' as a parish, given what we have sought to explore and lay out. How do we quantify this new space of ministry that we have laid out?

A friend recently sent me a link to an extraordinary blog called "A Church for Starving Artists." They offered an extraordinary reflection on the risk-taking journey of moving beyond merely a program-maintenance model for determining parish health. I would say that it offers a *framework for engaging in the more vulnerable work of faithfulness*. Too often, success is measured in the number of folks attending any one particular program. Rather, A Church for Starving Artists offers these questions for "debriefing" that I commend to us all.

- Who was transformed?
- Whose life was changed?
- Were relationships strengthened?
- Was it joyful making it happen?
- Was new leadership equipped?

I would add a couple more debriefing question that I think are extremely important:

- Was there an increase in the awareness of God's Presence in your life?
- How has your understanding of Christ's love for you been nurtured?

Friends, we have the opportunity to envision something new as Grace Parish—rather, we have the opportunity to trust in the Spirit's Guiding Presence in a radical way.

I pray that we realize that we can give ourselves space to honestly continuing our ongoing discernment. I wonder what it would mean to trust the Spirit's Leading in this way?

Here are a few specific things that I wonder about, as we continue to journey in this way:

- What would be a faithful space for an Associate Rector, as I continue my own discernment in this area as your rector? Might it be something along the lines of "Associate Rector for Ministries of Compassion?" I wonder.....
- How might the youth take even more leadership roles in the parish community? Could we have a youth vestry liaison, who could be present and share his or her voice?
- What would it be like for our parish to explore starting a School of Prayer? What if we piloted a school in which we could bring in guest teachers, offer a more intentional Christian education framework for children, youth and adults? What about our own lecture series, offered to the community at large?
- What are ways in which Grace can be even more intentionally engaged regarding social and cultural diversity within the broader community?
- If we truly delve into this model of parish leadership, how might Grace be what some have described as a "teaching parish," in which folks could come as interns and study and explore different ways of spiritual leadership with us?
- What are ways in which we can increase our awareness of the Children of Grace Preschool, integrating it more and more into the fullness (and consciousness) of parish life?
- What are ways we could explore an intentional stewardship framework that utilizes the entire year, rather than wait until the Fall each year and only focus our invitation to participate there?
- What are ways we can engage more and more with what I call a *contemplative evangelism*, cultivating an ethos at the parish which embraces those in the community who are seeking a deeper relationship with God, and who have questions about who Jesus may be for them at this time in their lives?
- How could Grace Church be a community center for Arts and Culture, within Gainesville and Hall County – and beyond?
- How could the parish engage more intentionally with Brenau, reaching out to offer a space for students' spiritual growth and nurture?