

SIGNS OF LIFE

NURTURING SPIRITUAL GROWTH
— IN YOUR CHURCH —



JAY SIDEBOTHAM

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JAY SIDEBOTHAM

FORWARD MOVEMENT
Cincinnati, Ohio

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Introduction

Is Flat the New Up?

About two dozen rectors gathered for an annual clergy retreat, a gathering that was to last for several days. Most of that time would be facilitated by a guest presenter, but the time always began by going around the circle. Each church leader talked about what had been going on in their congregation over the past year. Along with successes, the leaders described challenges facing their congregations. These were often referred to as “war stories.” In recent years, the war stories included declining attendance, challenging budgets, clergy and staff running on fumes, cranky parishioners, battles with vestries, and so on. Church is not for the faint of heart. In the circle, several leaders boasted about the ways that they weren’t doing worse than last year. After a few of those accounts, members of the group began to wonder: *Is flat the new up?*

In the Episcopal Church, the ministry of Forward Movement began in the 1930s at a time of challenge and decline, not only in the church but also in the wider culture as well. The spirit of the Great Depression had spilled over into the church, and leaders were struggling to maintain the institution. During a discussion at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, someone rose and said: “We have to hold the line!” To which someone else responded: “We don’t need to hold the line. We need a *forward movement*.” Out of that conversation, the ministry of Forward Movement was launched, based on the premise and promise that the church *would* move forward with a focus on spiritual practices. Specifically, revitalization would come with reading and reflecting on scripture, bolstered by a deepened prayer life, led by persons committed to discipleship. It was a vision of the spiritual journey unfolding not only on Sunday mornings but throughout the week. The story of the

genesis of Forward Movement prompts us to consider what might be the forward movement for the church these days. *Do we see any signs of life?*

Welcome, then, to a discussion of how the church might *move forward*, with clear-eyed consideration of the various challenges facing congregations as well as a celebration of those practices that contribute to spiritual vitality in congregations. We call these best practice principles “signs of life.” The concepts and the stories presented in this book emerge from a ministry called RenewalWorks. RenewalWorks is a concerted effort to make spiritual growth the priority in Episcopal congregations and to build cultures of discipleship in those congregations. This book is intended to offer an honest assessment of the current state of the church and, at the same time, highlight signs that give us hope for the days ahead. The book is written free from illusion that there is any quick fix. Nor do we propose a prescriptive focus on programmatic solutions. Renewal in the life of the church requires a *culture change* in many cases, and that kind of change does not happen overnight. What you have in this book is simply hopeful confidence that it can happen. After all, with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).

This ministry of RenewalWorks began outside the Episcopal Church, at a large nondenominational church in suburban Chicago. Willow Creek Community Church was, by all measures, a model of success for congregational life. The parking lot was so big you could lose your car, so numbers were placed on light posts to help people remember where they parked. Few Episcopal churches face that challenge. But amid all the apparent success, senior leadership at Willow Creek came to realize that while they had been successful in welcoming newcomers in a seeker-friendly environment, they were not sure that people were actually *growing* in their spirituality. Their spiritual *hunger* was not necessarily being addressed. Many active members were dissatisfied and looking to other communities for spiritual *renewal*. This led the leadership to engage a market researcher to find out what was going on in the hearts of parishioners. Where were these people on their own spiritual journeys? What moved them? What shaped their religious

practice? What stood in the way of spiritual growth? The church created an online inventory to give an accurate picture of where people in the congregation were in their spiritual journey. Out of data gathered, they identified several best practice principles for vital congregations. But would that kind of learning apply to Episcopal congregations?

Starting the Work of Renewal

As rector of an Episcopal church north of Chicago, I got wind of the research emerging from Willow Creek, beginning with the learnings that vital congregations are ones that are deeply engaged with scripture. Based on that research, our parish began a yearlong process of reading the Bible. From September to May, we made a commitment to read scripture, front to back. Our education programs for adults and children focused on a passage of the week. Many in our congregation were reading scripture for the first time in a long time. Many had no idea of the trajectory of scripture. Did Abraham come before Moses? Where did David and Isaiah and Daniel and Jeremiah fit in the picture? There was indeed a sense of renewed spiritual interest in the parish, based on this experience of biblical exploration. People loved it.

With that initial success behind us, I decided to go deeper in exploration of this process from Willow Creek, offering the online inventory and subsequent workshops that served as a discernment tool. I came to think of it as spiritual strategic planning. We learned a lot about where members of our parish were in their spiritual journey. We got some clear ideas of where we would like to go.

In some respects, it was a bumpy start. The language from this more evangelical church was strange and in some cases offensive to our Anglican congregants. That led us to begin a process of translation and adaptation to make the material Episcopal/Anglican-friendly. The process included material that inquired into the meaning of the sacraments, as

we discovered there was great hunger for deeper understanding of the meaning of Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist.

The process led to a new level of engagement with questions of spiritual growth in the parish. Some people resisted that kind of focus. Others embraced it. Neighboring congregations began to express interest. A group of congregations in the diocese took on the work. Churches around the country heard about it. I began to get invitations to lead presentations, which spoke to me of the spiritual hunger in Episcopal congregations. That hunger seemed to be an important sign of life, a desire for more even if the roadmap was uncertain. Indeed, our research has since shown that Episcopalians have a deep hunger for spiritual growth, though folks are not always sure how to go about addressing that desire. Clergy don't always know how to address that need either. It became clear that there was a need to focus more intentionally on what this process had to offer. I was not able to do that and continue to run a church at the same time. So, I resigned my position as rector and launched a ministry in partnership with Forward Movement called RenewalWorks, which began on July 1, 2013.

The ministry of RenewalWorks seeks to help congregations (and their leaders) know where congregants are in their spiritual journeys. Based on the data gathered through spiritual inventories, leaders and congregants can chart a course forward. The process has revealed that Episcopalians go to church for all kinds of reasons. Some go simply because it's what they have always done or because it is what their family has always done. Some come for the music. Others come for a sense of community, to be with people who have become friends and companions on the journey. Some come to savor the beauty of a particular building, others to be involved in a particular outreach ministry. All of these are good reasons for coming to church. But our work embraces a lofty but vital aspiration: *the primary reason for coming to church is spiritual growth*, by which we mean growth in love of God and love of neighbor. All other reasons (music, fellowship, service) grow out of that commitment to spiritual growth.

Stages Along the Way

That pathway of spiritual growth is represented in RenewalWorks's research through a spiritual continuum, a linear depiction of the spiritual life describing four distinct stages. Based on how people respond to the initial inventory (or survey), describing their own spiritual state, they are placed in one of four categories.

Exploring

At the time of publication, 18 percent of Episcopalians surveyed identify themselves within the first stage of spiritual growth—*exploring*. This is a particularly interesting insight given the fact that many respondents also indicate they have been attending the church longer than ten years. People in this first stage are exploring the basic beliefs expressed in the Episcopal tradition. They are drawn to the beauty of the liturgy, particularly Holy Eucharist. At the same time, they are eager for a deeper understanding of the sacraments and for help from the church in that regard. They affirm belief in God, though they are not sure what faith claims they would make about Christ. Generally speaking, faith is not a significant part of their life on a day-to-day basis.

Growing

The majority surveyed (53 percent) identify themselves within the second stage of spiritual growth—*growing*. They are committed to the Christian faith, but they still have many questions and would not speak of having a personal relationship with God in Christ. People in the first two stages of the continuum are highly dependent on the church, especially the clergy, to help them grow in faith. Such growth requires development of a relationship with God in Christ—and this can be tricky for Episcopalians, who don't always identify with language of a personal relationship with God. An authentic vision of this relationship can often be accomplished by exploration of personal spiritual practices

during the week, when people are not in church. Such practices may include prayer, time in solitude, and reflection on scripture.

Deepening

Twenty-four percent of parishioners identify themselves within the third stage of spiritual growth—*deepening* their relationship with God in Christ. They describe having a personal relationship with God, and they are moving toward a place where they value that personal relationship with God even more than their particular church membership. They feel close to Christ and depend on him daily for guidance. One person described this stage as a person driving a car with God in the passenger seat, always assisting in life's navigation. For this group, opportunities to have spiritual friendships, mentors, or small-group connections are especially important, as these provide mutual accountability and moral/spiritual support.

Centered

Five percent of the respondents identify themselves within the fourth stage of spiritual growth—that of being *centered*. Of course, by no means does this stage's rank imply that the spiritual journey is over or that this group cannot enjoy further growth. But for this small percentage, a personal relationship with God in Christ is the most important relationship in their lives. Picking up the automotive analogy again, in this case, God is driving the car, and the person at this stage is in the passenger seat.

Catalysts for Spiritual Growth

The point of this continuum is to express the aspiration that people will move deeper in their own faith, that they will experience real spiritual growth, which we define as growth in love of God and love of

neighbor. This linear model for spiritual growth may not *fully* explain the miracle of deepening a life with God. There are other models out there that address different aspects of the mystery of growth. But this continuum can be helpful, particularly as we focus on the movement in the continuum. The movement from one stage to the next is supported by beliefs or practices that serve as impetus for deeper engagement in life with God. Based on our research, four catalysts, in particular, make a difference.

Engagement with scripture

At every stage along the continuum, engagement with scripture is transformative. When Episcopal congregations go through the RenewalWorks process, one of the most common responses is for congregations to find a way to engage with scripture as a community.

Transforming power of the eucharist

For Episcopalians, especially for those beginning an intentional spiritual journey with God in Christ, participation in the eucharist is key. The more that churches can help people grow in understanding this mysterious sacrament, the further people move along the spiritual continuum.

Deeper prayer life

Research indicates a lack of confidence and satisfaction with prayer life. Apart from cracking open the Book of Common Prayer, many Episcopalians don't really know what a prayer life looks like. But a discernible deepening of one's relationship with God happens in the same way any relationship grows—through time spent in conversation. The more that we call people to an active prayer life, one marked by the varieties of prayer experience (confession, praise, intercession, thanksgiving, and contemplation) and by balancing listening *and* speaking, the more they will grow.

Heart of the leader

These transformations hinge in large part on the commitment of the leader to their own discipleship, including clarity of belief, dedication to spiritual practice, and service in the world. Leaders can't give what they don't have. To attend to their own spiritual health, leaders need to stay connected to the reasons they got into ministry in the first place, to remember their first love.

Indexing Spiritual Vitality

Another insight that emerged from this research is an index—that is, a number given to a congregation based on the results of the inventory. The index is made up of three components: the church's role, personal spiritual practices, and faith in action. It bears some resemblance to principles of the recovery movement, which emphasize a gathering of people, a commitment to daily engagement, working on recovery one day at a time, and service (or putting faith into action).

It's tempting to think of the index as a grade, which is not the intention at all. Rather, the index number provides a starting point, a place to measure for future growth and transformation. Perhaps the most interesting feature about the number is not how a congregation compares to others but rather how it will compare to *itself* at some future date.



This book explores the findings of the RenewalWorks surveys and ministries and offers insight into how congregations might apply those learnings to their own context. We'll begin by discussing some distinctive

characteristics of Episcopal congregations, noting several archetypes that are common in the Episcopal Church. Then we'll consider the five best practice principles—the signs of life—with consideration of how each finds its foundation in scripture and liturgy.

We offer these insights in hopes for the church. As the book begins, we invite readers to join in prayer for the church, perhaps using this prayer that appears in several places in the Book of Common Prayer. It shows up in the service for the Great Vigil of Easter, in the Liturgy for Good Friday, and in the Ordination Services for Bishop and Priest.

Pray with us:

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were being cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Questions for Reflection

As you look back on your life, have there been periods of spiritual growth? What were the catalysts that caused them?

Were there times when you felt stalled or stuck spiritually? What were the catalysts behind such experiences?

How do you react to the idea of a spiritual continuum? Do you think that spiritual growth has a linear dimension? Are there other ways of thinking about spiritual growth?

How do you react to the idea of a spiritual vitality index? Do you think that spiritual vitality can be measured? Why or why not?

Archetypes of the Spiritual Journey

Where is your church on the spiritual journey?

In order to make progress along this spiritual journey, it helps to know where your congregation is. As noted in the introduction's discussion of a spiritual continuum, our spiritual lives range from exploratory to a sense of centeredness. And while it's important to examine that inner spiritual life of the individual, it's equally important to get a sense of the spiritual life of the community. This requires a close look at the current state of your congregation, comprising not only the individual spiritual lives of its members but also the character of the congregation, its profile, its personality, its archetype.

Communities of all sorts have personalities—cultures they've developed over time. And while similar churches are by no means monolithic or homogeneous, we can identify some predominant characteristics among them. You might think of them as patterns or traits, and, indeed, such traits persist over generations, for good or ill. The same is true of corporations. It's true of sports teams. Lord knows, it is true of family systems. And apparently, it is true of churches.

If one doubts that this kind of characterization applies to faith communities, consider the biblical record. In several places in scripture, we can observe distinct characteristics of congregations. Perhaps this is most apparent in New Testament letters to some of the early churches. Paul's letter to the Philippians speaks of a resilient community marked by joy and faithfulness amid adversity. That is a very different account than Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he describes a church lacking clarity about its mission. This has, in turn, led to division and exclusion and triggers Paul's anger. (And one would never want to be on the receiving end of Paul's anger!) That profile is different from the church in Corinth, accustomed as it is to controversy and marked by factions fighting on all kinds of issues (issues, in fact, that the church *still* fights about!). These letters (and we suspect a few are still missing) depict a contentious place, an unsettled spirit. And then compare Corinth to the culture of the church in Ephesus, which Paul describes as a marvel and miracle of inclusion, where grace leads to a whole new way of life and dividing walls are torn down.

One can also turn to the first chapters of the Revelation to John, as the author addresses seven churches and describes the character profiles of each community. The church in Ephesus is marked by endurance, but it seems to have lost track of its first love (Revelation 2:1-7). The church in Smyrna seems to be both impoverished and rich at the same time (Revelation 2:8-11). The church in Pergamum is susceptible to teaching that pulls it away from the gospel passed on to them (Revelation 2:12-17). And so it continues, with portraits of distinct communities addressed with both praise and criticism, offering a realistic and rigorous assessment of their current state and instructions about different ways for them to move forward.

RenewalWorks seeks to follow these scriptural examples in naming and assessing the current state of the congregation and then providing insight for ways to deepen and grow. The ministry asks the questions: What spiritual characteristics can we identify in congregations today? What are the strengths and the challenges they bear? How can communities move forward from the place in which they presently

find themselves? In a season when mainline congregations, especially Episcopal churches, grapple with decline, fights within, and fears without, where can we find signs of life?

The first step is to evaluate the distinct character of each community. Speaking the truth in love, we can take a clear and courageous look at where these communities are right now. Cally Parkinson, a former senior staff member at Willow Creek church, has been a part of the spiritual assessment process for many years. She consults regularly with congregations about the research done through the REVEAL process, a spiritual assessment tool to explore spiritual vitality that provided the basic framework for the RenewalWorks inventory. In the course of her work, she came to identify eight archetypes of churches. Think of these as patterns, segments, clusters, or personalities. Parkinson describes these eight archetypes in her book, *Rise: Bold Strategies to Transform Your Church*.

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- ❖ **Vibrant:** Faith among congregants is strong and mature but still growing. People love the church.
 - ❖ **Troubled:** People are spiritually immature and unhappy with the church and with its senior pastor.
 - ❖ **Complacent:** Faith is surprisingly underdeveloped, given that attenders are longtime churchgoers.
 - ❖ **Introverted:** Faith is strong, but faith-based behaviors are lacking.
 - ❖ **Average:** No spiritual measures deviate from the norm.
 - ❖ **Extroverted:** Faith is underdeveloped, but community service is embraced.
 - ❖ **Self-motivated:** Faith is strong across the board, yet people are un-enthused about the church.

- ❖ **Energized:** Faith is somewhat underdeveloped but growing, and people love the church.
-

While many of the congregations studied by Parkinson and evaluated in the REVEAL process differ from Episcopal communities, the research still offers quite a few lessons for Episcopalians. Based on research in more than 300 Episcopal congregations, RenewalWorks has gained significant insight into how these archetypes might apply to the Episcopal world. Notably, the Episcopal congregations engaged with this research fall into *three* of these eight categories: troubled, complacent, and extroverted.

Let us consider these three particular archetypes more closely, looking at what they have to say about the current state of these types of congregations—and what congregations of such character might do to move forward. See if you recognize your congregation in any of these profiles.

❖ **The Troubled Church**

Rooted, Restless, and Ready to Grow

Rooted and restless. That's how former Archbishop George Carey described one congregation he visited. We may be familiar with churches that are primarily *rooted*. There's some truth to the description of Anglicans as the "frozen chosen." For those churches, the words that haunt any church leader come to mind: "We've never done it that way" or its corollary "We've always done it this way."

One of the great gifts of Anglicanism is its deep roots in tradition. But there is a difference between being rooted in the community of saints and being stuck in habits that have encrusted our spiritual lives. As we will see, rootedness can easily manifest itself in complacency, with no aspiration for growth or movement or transformation. That

can make it difficult to think about how—or even why—the church should grow.

About half of our churches fall into this category, an archetype described as *troubled*. This description, however, calls for some explanation. By calling such churches “troubled,” we are not hinting at church fights nor is it a reference to financial difficulties or scandals among the leadership. Rather, the troubledness here connotes spiritual restlessness, a sense of wanting more. Saint Augustine famously called attention to such troubledness in the opening lines of his *Confessions*: “You have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” On the one hand, such restlessness is a good thing, indicating to us that we are not where we should be. On the other hand, however, this restlessness requires guidance and initiative to begin to move.

Those in troubled churches are not exactly sure how to grow spiritually nor are they convinced that their leadership is willing or even able to help address that need. It’s entirely possible the leadership doesn’t really know how to help in this situation. It may not be something they were taught in seminary. In addition, those in leadership may be spiritually restless, hungry, or troubled in their own lives.

This church profile corroborates studies that indicate a spiritual restlessness in the broader culture. This restlessness has manifested in a significant increase in the number of “nones and dones” in our culture. (Nones are those who indicate no religious affiliation, the fastest growing religious identification in our culture. Dones represent those who have left the church, for any variety of reasons.) Add to that the recent experience of social distancing triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, and we cannot deny the pervasiveness of restlessness. This collective experience, from which no one remains unaffected, has caused people to take a fresh look at what it means to be church and how they wish to affiliate with religious institutions in the days ahead (or not). Meanwhile, the church often spends time answering questions that no one is asking, leaving widespread hunger for deeper and more

meaningful spiritual lives unaddressed and causing people to look elsewhere for answers.

Troubled churches have two defining characteristics. First, there is *dissatisfaction with the church and with the senior leadership* (specifically, the rector or priest-in-charge). That dissatisfaction is not a matter of disliking the person. It is not a specific argument on a theological or political point. Rather, the dissatisfaction seems to be more about a sense that the leadership has failed to provide a pathway to spiritual growth. It's a sense that there is more, but congregants flounder, not knowing what they don't know and uncertain how to move forward.

Second, the church in this archetype has a high percentage of congregants who fall into the early stages of spiritual growth (as discussed in the introduction). As such, they may show signs of spiritual apathy or stasis. Interestingly, the RenewalWorks research offers an unexpected insight: in many cases, people who have been around the church for a long time are still in a place of spiritual immaturity. For this group, participation and presence in worship hasn't led to spiritual growth—nor has activity in church programs, however frequent. People in troubled congregations depend heavily on the church leaders for spiritual traction.

So, what can be done? There is an incredible opportunity here. We can take comfort in the teachings of Jesus, especially the first beatitude, the opening line of the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). Some paraphrased versions render the verse to speak of need rather than poverty: Blessed are those *who know their need* of God. Congregants in troubled congregations are primed for more. Three practices can help congregations in the troubled archetype to get moving along the spiritual continuum.

1. Focus on the heart of the leader

I often tell those in church leadership: “You can't give what you don't have.” By this, I mean that those who lead the church must focus on

the authenticity of their own spiritual journey. Are they being fed? Are they being challenged? Are they still learning? Are they stuck? Or, to use an automotive metaphor, have they run out of gas, gotten a flat tire, or slipped into a ditch? Have they given up?

Clergy often feel isolated, depleted by incessant criticism and demands, and concerned about family and finances. Understandably, these issues can lead to ineffective ministry. In the next chapter, we'll focus on the role of the leader, so we'll only address this briefly here. But for movement of a community out of troubled restlessness, its leaders are called to focus on their own spiritual state. Is their own love for God and neighbor growing? Does it serve as model and inspiration for a congregation that is stuck?

2. Focus on the intersection of beliefs and practices

A journalist trying to understand the decline of mainline congregations traveled around the country to interview various churchgoers. When he asked a youth group member in the Midwest about why she was part of the church, she responded: "I love being Episcopalian. You don't have to believe anything." There's a graceful dimension to this, for sure. This young woman felt accepted in the community. But there's also a challenge that may be a serious threat to our congregations.

In Chapter 3, we explore some of these basic questions: What does it mean to be part of the community? What do we stand for? Where do we give our hearts (which is one way to think about belief)? For many congregants in troubled churches, there is a hunger for teaching about both the meaning and relevance of scripture and the liturgy, especially the sacraments. Episcopalians often don't want to be presented with a list of dogmatic demands requiring their signature. At the same time, there is a desire to know why we do what we do. As Saint Anselm put it in the latter years of the eleventh century, faith seeks understanding. Are our churches providing that?

3. Offer an integrated, high-profile, Bible-based initiative

Again and again, we see that congregations that read and study the scriptures together undergo a collective spiritual movement. That's why we've identified "Embedding Scripture in Everything" as one of the best practice principles. Chapter 4 discusses how this embedding work can be done. Wherever people are, it seems that the scripture has power to transform, regardless of how it is interpreted. We have found that if a congregation can engage in reading scripture together, perhaps over the course of a liturgical season, an academic year, or even over the course of several years, the sacred text brings people together and helps their community move forward. It's a powerful opportunity for parishioners across generations to explore the basis of their faith in age-appropriate ways. And there's significant potential for growth when congregants affirm that they can do this together.

❖ The Complacent Church

We're Fine, Thanks

In the final book of the New Testament, the author is instructed in his vision to write to one church in particular, "You are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:15b-16). Harsh words for what we are calling here the "complacent church."

What does a complacent church look like? At one of the congregations involved in RenewalWorks ministry, the rector recognized that complacency aptly described his congregation, much to his chagrin. But taking a lighthearted approach, he announced that his church would be changing its tagline to: "We're spiritually shallow, and we're fine with that!" Unfortunately, this can be said of many Episcopal churches. According to our research, complacent churches represent 23 percent of our congregations.

That rector's tongue-in-cheek response indicates a deeper challenge. In many churches—and congregants—there is no expectation of transformation or spiritual growth. And in many complacent churches, talk of spiritual growth can be (at least, initially) met with resistance. In one congregation, the rector had her own conversion experience, realizing that if the church was not about spiritual growth, there was no point in meeting. She began to speak incessantly about the call to this kind of growth. With singular focus, she preached, taught, and wrote about this need. When it came time for gathering annual pledges to support the ministry of the church, members of the congregation reached out by phone and personal visits in an organized campaign to get financial commitments for the coming year. In one of these calls, the person being asked for a pledge replied: "I don't understand all this talk about spiritual growth. I want to know at what vestry meeting it was decided that we are about spiritual growth. I want to see the resolution."

Indeed, spiritual growth is not a universal expectation. If a congregation wishes to establish spiritual growth as a priority, it will call for conversation, education, and consensus that spiritual growth is an important value. Such a commitment brings change. It's a call to transformation, and we all know how much we like change. As that patron saint of organizational management, Dilbert, once said: "Change is good. You go first."

There are two defining characteristics of a complacent church. First, there is spiritual apathy. Congregants demonstrate little interest in or commitment to growing their faith, especially to developing their faith beyond the hour or so they grant the church on a Sunday morning. This frame of mind can be attributed to several factors. Some in our culture admit that they are simply too busy to think about the spiritual life. Others have been wounded by organized religion. Others have given spiritual growth a try in the past and have come to expect that nothing could ever change. Second, like those in troubled churches, congregants may have attended church for years, yet they still seem to find themselves in the earliest stages of spiritual maturity. Long tenure in a church does not mean that there has been any spiritual growth.

As noted in the introduction, it's worth paying attention to the reasons why people—especially those in the Episcopal Church—choose to go to church. Some attend primarily for the social aspect. Others are drawn to the aesthetics of a particular church. They find the music or architecture to be pleasing, perhaps even inspiring. Others come because the church is an avenue for service in the world. Others come because it is simply what they have always done. Perhaps they attend to please a family member, a spouse, or a parent, which can be an act of kind generosity but is rarely an avenue for spiritual growth. These are each and all noble aspirations, and they are good reasons to gather. But they don't necessarily correspond to a desire for spiritual growth, which as Chapter 1 described, has to do with growing in love of God and neighbor. These are satisfied with the church as it is, which can complicate the path to spiritual growth. But naming the issue and challenging folks to a different way of viewing their spiritual lives can provide forward movement on the spiritual continuum.

One church grappled with this dynamic. Brenda Husson, rector, and Ryan Fleenor, vicar, wrote about the experience of their congregation, St. James' Church on Madison Avenue in New York City. The article, "When Fine Isn't Enough," is reprinted in the appendix, but consider the following highlight of that piece:

Whenever parishioners were asked what they loved about St. James', they always spoke first about the sense of community they found here. It's hard to complain about that, but there was no talk of transformation or God, let alone Jesus. And stewardship (again, fine by the standards of many parishes) was flat, indicating that we were, for many of our parishioners, just another nonprofit. Maybe their favorite, but not a place that was changing or challenging them at the center of their lives.

As we asked in the introduction: Is flat the new "up" in the Episcopal Church, as many clergy have come to believe with some sense of resignation? What steps can a complacent church take?