

A perspective on the challenges and possibilities of future thriving of St. Mark's-in-the-Valley, Los Olivos, California, buffeted by COVID and other forces of change

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Churches, including the Episcopal Church, "navigating off the map"

The General Convention is the governing body of The Episcopal Church. Every three years it meets as a bicameral legislature that includes the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops, composed of deputies elected from among the parishes in each diocese, and bishops from each diocese.

The 80th General Convention was held earlier this month, and among other actions, voted on six **resolutions intended to help The Episcopal Church adapt to the pandemic and other recent changes in society** and to find new ways of supporting the church's mission and ministry. The work on the resolutions was led by the Committee on the State of the Church.

"Little did we know when we began this work that a global pandemic would place **the church in the midst of the greatest adaptive challenge of our lifetimes**," the Rev. Chris Rankin-Williams, chair of the committee, told deputies. "The pace of congregational decline across the country has been accelerated by the pandemic, and **there is great uncertainty about the future and financial viability of many of our churches**."

Reduced Sunday attendance at St. Mark's

Reduced Sunday attendance at St. Mark's-in-the-Valley is typical of churches throughout the country, though one of our initial adaptations, adding a range of available services and shortening all services, is **enabling us to have as much as two-thirds of our pre-pandemic Average**

At the same time, many congregations and their clergy and lay leaders have opportunities to learn from the church's experience navigating the pandemic, Rankin-Williams said, emphasizing **the need to embrace "collaborative innovation" and resist "the urge to rely on familiar technical solutions or fear-based reactions."**

"We are truly **navigating off the map**. With the **depth of challenges, the solution is not clear**," he said. The resolutions the committee proposed were intended "to position the church to address adaptive challenges and evaluate the experiments that are necessary to create our future."

Studies by the Gallup Organization, Pew Research, and reports by various media organizations have all noted that **churches throughout the country** are increasingly operating along the lines of what they were prior to the pandemic, but **with 50-60% of their previous attendance on average**.

Sunday Attendance (ASA). We will continue to make additional changes, for example, adding a Wednesday early evening (5:30 pm) service in the autumn and broadening available Christian formation and spiritual growth opportunities.

Our community connections

General Convention also made steps toward including a broader focus on the work of parishes, beyond the traditional narrow focus on ASA. Some at St. Mark's realize that our significant emphasis on community service **enables us to connect with literally hundreds of people each week** through our Open Doors, Preschool, SYV Community Kitchen, and Concert Series programs. The Summer Classic, held in person again last year and this year, **raises community personal and financial support** for those programs. Programs in the SYV Community Kitchen are building in number and scale. In addition to the Summer Classic, "freewill" **building use donations in 2021 alone were \$31,500.**

Our connection with our wider community **enlarges the number of people who care about the ongoing strength and vitality of St. Mark's-in-the-Valley.** Day by day there are people on our campus engaged in important work, and presenting a vibrant and energetic picture of St. Mark's publicly, **inspiring goodwill throughout our local region and the county.**

My doctoral work was in Congregational Development – which has also been my great

The toll of grief and stress for lay and ordained leaders

All lay and ordained leaders of the church have experienced **grief and stress particular to the ongoing life of the church** while also being involved in the larger and quite real grief and stress related to death, illness, and radically shifting patterns of daily life related to the pandemic and the effects of other social stresses, whether related to social inequity, or the

Creative Challenges

At the same time, this period is one that **offers many, many creative challenges for those who are ready and willing to**

interest in 37 years of ordained ministry. I have avidly read about and discussed the impact of the pandemic since it came upon us between the second and third Sundays of Lent in 2020 – over two years ago. To the extent possible, **St. Mark's has been adapting all along the way**, returning to in-person outdoor services in September of 2020, to in-person indoor services on Pentecost in 2021, and building our service options through 2021 and 2022 – **generally speaking, doing all of these things, including receiving communion in both kinds, on a much earlier schedule**

I write today realizing that **some members of the parish may not have been reading about, studying, thinking about, reflecting on, and discussing all of the various factors that are being presented in this remarkable time.** That being said, our **Vestry and Finance Committees have been exceedingly helpful** in discussing and reflecting on the work at hand, implementing changes, and repeatedly adapting as has been necessary day by day and week by week.

extreme polarization of red and blue America in this same period.

Many ordained and lay professional church leaders have left their work, swept along with many others in **the Great Resignation.** Many parishes in the Episcopal Church and in our Diocese do not have clergy in place and in various regions in the country there are clergy shortages.

engage them. Also, many **people who have never been part of a faith community** are now testing participation in

a desire to act on their interest in and longing for connection with other people and for having community. Should we approach our former ASA, we will do so with new members, though **a few** previous members *may* still return to being active.

At St. Mark's-in-the-Valley **we can't wait (and aren't waiting)** until the General

Our current reality

For now, **people are attending all four of our Sunday services.** The 8 am, 11:30 am, and 5 pm services are all small, with attendance between 4 and 15 persons each. In aggregate, of course, they may add as many as 25 to our ASA and, more importantly, they are meaningful to those attending as each one offers an opportunity for connection and "quality" time in conversation and in experiencing the word, prayer, and sacrament together. Also, they are good initial access experiences for many who want to gather at a certain time or condition (such as all outdoors as at the 11:30 service). Also, while some of the same people are coming to each service, the group is not the same from week to week, so, perhaps 45 or 50 people are rotating through those services.

We are offering **children's programming at the 10 am service**, both childcare and Sunday School and we will be expanding those options and possibly adding in Youth Breakfast in the autumn. Some youth are serving regularly as Acolytes, though Acolyte service has been impacted this summer with

Valley Breakfast and other Community Kitchen programs are giving us more and more opportunities to serve hands-on and to welcome into this service friends and neighbors from throughout the area. Truly, week-by-week, we are growing in both feeding and building the community.

Other Open Doors activity is building steadily, though it was strong in many aspects

Convention or our Diocese of Los Angeles offers their thoughts about what to do to meet the adaptive challenges facing us. I suppose some faith communities are waiting for direction while also having fewer and fewer available options.

many youth traveling and being away for extended times at sleep-away camps (all very positive as they have been restricted from those experiences recently).

We continue to have beautiful music at the 10 am service, the ministry of a very welcoming and engaging corps of Ushers, and the ministry of skilled Readers and faithful Chalice Bearers. The work of the Altar Guild has grown significantly and the members have responded lovingly in all ways.

We are **planning towards the autumn** and increased activity liturgically and in terms of both children's and adult spiritual formation programming. Discussions are beginning on a speakers series, a retreat, additional contemplative prayer opportunities (joining our vital Tuesday at 4 pm Contemplative Prayer time), and book study and topical study programs. Education for Ministry (EFM) will be starting a new season in the fall, a continuing gift to the faith community and to those who have participated in particular.

throughout the pandemic. More and more groups are gathering to work together.

Our SYV Concert Series is planning one of its most exciting seasons to date (and after more than 40 seasons!).

So, while the griefs, stresses, and concerns are present, **there is a lot of basis for hope at St. Mark's-in-the-Valley.**

This year will be one of our most challenging years financially

Financially, St. Mark's-in-the-Valley was sustained by ongoing giving by members of the faith community, giving by members of the wider community, grants for Community Kitchen work, two PPP (federal Paycheck Protection Program) grants, one SBA (federal Small Business Administration) loan, and one loan from our Endowment. **Much of this funding is not available now or in the future and loan repayments have begun for the SBA and Endowment loan.**

With reduced participation/attendance as noted above, 2022 and 2023 financial viability will depend on significant special gifts from members of the worshipping community and strong, increased annual giving. Additionally, we will seek grants and additional special

fundraising event income for our community service programs (especially the Community Kitchen and Concert Series). **This year, 2022, will be one of the most challenging years financially in St. Mark's history – in addition to all of the programmatic challenges already in process.**

In four years, 2026, St. Mark's will celebrate **our 100th anniversary**, which says that the faith community has **adapted, changed, and survived through 10 decades of change of all sorts.** The inner life of the parish is, most likely, inclined towards survival and thriving while experiencing adversity, struggle, change, and the challenges of the future.

Living generously, seeing a new present and future unfold

Both who we have been and who we are provide a basis for a new present and future thriving. **The undying presence of God with us, and within whom we live enables, enlivens, and empowers us, and also provides gifts to each of us for all of us** of all of the resources of every sort

we need moment-by-moment and season-by-season. As we **live generously** we will have not only the benefit of rich memories of times past but the excitement of seeing a new present and future unfolding, perhaps in unexpected and surprising ways.



ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

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