

Towards a Missional Polity:
Parish Life and the Missio Dei in Vicinia
The Church of St. John the Evangelist, Hamilton

by

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Looking Through a “Structural Frame”

In my previous paper, “Leadership and Organizational Issues: Formal and Informal Leadership Styles and Organizational Patterns: The Church of St. John the Evangelist, Hamilton,”¹ I offered a relatively positive view of current practices and organization. I gave this positive view based on interaction with the themes that arose in Robert Bellah, et al., *The Good Society*; Putman and Campbell’s, *American Grace*, and Ammerman and Farnsley’s, *Congregation and Community*.² In my view the themes discussed in these books are very important for the missional church. These included:

- attention to the local context;³
- “neighborliness” (which I described in terms of citizenship and a contribution towards the common good;⁴ and,
- “parish” life, (which I described in terms of local community engagement with a mutuality of relationship).⁵

¹ David J. Anderson, “Leadership and Organizational Issues: Formal and Informal Leadership Styles and Organizational Patterns: The Church of St. John the Evangelist, Hamilton” (Unpublished essay, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN).

² Nancy Tatom Ammerman and Arthur Emery Farnsley, *Congregation & Community* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Robert N. Bellah et al., *The Good Society*, Kindle ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Kindle ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

³ Anderson, “Leadership and Organizational Issues: Formal and Informal Leadership Styles and Organizational Patterns: The Church of St. John the Evangelist, Hamilton,” 3.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵ Ibid., 9.

Rather than the making rigorous assessment of the structural realities at SJE, my positive assessment of leadership and organization was also colored by how I believe the life of the Church of St. John the Evangelist (SJE) reflects the ecclesiology outlined in my paper “Missio Dei in Vicinia: The Mission of God in the Neighborhood: An Ecclesiology for the Local Parish.”⁶

In their book, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*, Lee G. Bolman and Terrance E. Deal speak about the skill of “reframing”.⁷ Upon further reflection I see that my previous assessment of the leadership and structures at SJE were largely been influenced by what Bolman and Deal refer to as the “human resource” and “symbolic” frames and that my analysis had not adequately considered the “structural frame”. Bolman and Deal define a frame as “a coherent set of ideas or beliefs forming a prism or lens that enables you to see and understand more clearly what goes on from day to day.”⁸ Looking at SJE afresh in a structural frame I am able to see that the combination of inherited structure, polity and real day-to-day organization at SJE is less than ideal as SJE seeks to join in God’s mission in the neighborhood.

Before returning to analyze the organizational structures and practices at SJE it might be helpful to offer a reminder of what such structure is for or what purpose it is meant to serve. Craig Van Gelder reminds us,

⁶ David J. Anderson, “Missio Dei in Vicinia: The Mission of God in the Neighborhood: An Ecclesiology for the Local Parish” (Unpublished essay, Luther Seminary, St Paul, MN), <http://djanderson.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Term-Paper-FINAL.pdf> (accessed November 1, 2013).

⁷ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, Fifth ed. Kindle ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013).

⁸ *Ibid.*, loc. 1255-1256.

The church is. The church does what it is. The church organizes what it does. The nature of the church is based on God's presence through the Spirit. The ministry of the church flows out of the church's nature. The organization of the church is designed to support the ministry of the church. Keeping these three aspects in the right sequence is important when considering the development of a missiological ecclesiology.⁹

The church is. The church is God's creation; a collection of people who are called to participate in God's mission in the world. God's mission is with a view to redeeming the world and returning the world to God's reign of peace and wholeness. "God's redemptive work in the world has three aspects: creation, re-creation, and consummation."¹⁰ The church is not the kingdom of God, but a participant (not a perfect one) with God in God's reign. The church is called to be a sign, a foretaste and servants of the present and coming reign of God, in wholeness, peace, forgiveness and reconciliation.¹¹

*The church does what it is.*¹² A sign points beyond itself to something else. The church is a sign of God's kingdom and as such exists not to draw attention to itself but to point to the kingdom of God, to draw attention to the ways in which God is bringing wholeness to the world.¹³

Likewise, a foretaste is not the whole meal, but a sample of what is to come. The church is a foretaste of the kingdom, but not the whole meal. Yet as a foretaste the church

⁹ Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), loc. 593-598.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, loc. 1392-1393.

¹¹ See, Philip D. Kenneson et al., *The Shape of God's Reign, Getting Your Feet Wet* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

¹² Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, loc. 1978-1979.

¹³ Kenneson et al., *The Shape of God's Reign*, 35.

is meant to provide some sense of what is to come, to be an anticipation of the kingdom of God.¹⁴

Likewise again, as servant does not act wholly on their own initiative, but serves the purposes of the one that they serve. The church has not been charged with ushering in the kingdom of God through its own initiative, but is an agent of God's purposes. Just as Jesus always insisted that he was a servant (e.g., Matthew 20:28), so the church is called to the same role (Philippians 2:3-8). The role of service is particularly important given the particular difference of the nature of the king and kingdom the church serves, which is unlike any kings or kingdoms of this world.¹⁵

The church organizes what it does. “The organization of the church provides the structures for the church to carry out its ministry— the church organizes what it does.”¹⁶

The organizational and structural life of the church cannot be overlooked as somehow superfluous to its true calling. As Van Gelder argues,

Because the church is a social community that is both holy and human, everything the church does in the world is to bear witness to the purposes of God and his redemptive power. Church organization— how the church develops its structures, processes, and leadership roles— is itself a form of witness to the world. It witnesses to the fact that here exists a social community that possesses a spiritual character. It is a witness that a redemptive use of power is possible within a human community. This witness can be either positive or negative depending on how faithfully the organization of the church expresses its nature and ministry.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 36.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, loc. 2369-2370.

¹⁷ Ibid., loc. 2451-2455.

This means that church organization is not merely about getting the ministry of the church done, but is about getting the ministry of the church done in such a way that is reflective of and consummate with the kingdom of God.

Current Formal Structures and Practices

Figure 1, below, provides a picture of the current formal structures at SJE. Those items colored in the red-purple are those that are prescribed in canon law, while those in the blue are local adaptations with the possibility of change.

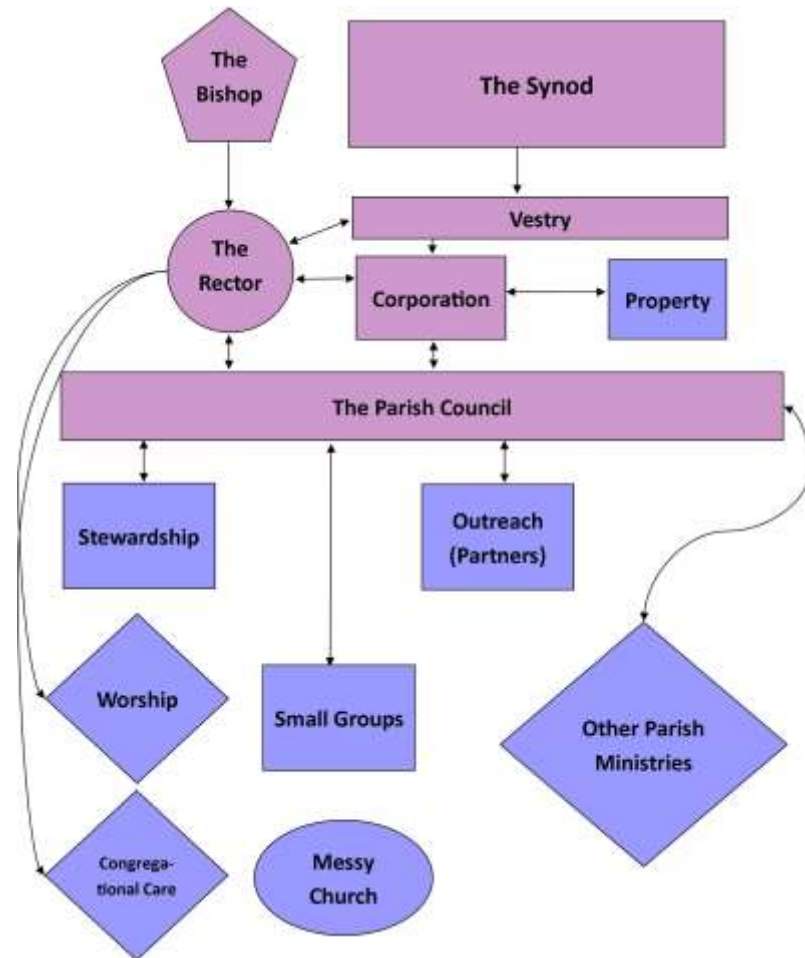


Figure 1: SJE Current Organizational Structure

A Basic Description

Inherited Structures (Not About to Change)

In the case of SJE, an Anglican parish in the Diocese of Niagara, certain elements of the formal structure and practice are dictated by the Canons of Diocese of Niagara, and in some cases, archaic statutes of the Province of Ontario and the Dominion of Canada.

The basic unit in Anglican polity is not a local congregation, but a bishop and a diocese. Because the bishop cannot always be present to lead each local parish, authority for the local ministry is conferred by the bishop to his or her appointed cleric, who is known as the “rector”, or sometimes as the “incumbent”.

The administration of the parish is the shared responsibility of the rector and the churchwardens. The rector appoints one lay-person from the parish, and the people of the parish elect one person who serves as “churchwardens”, the “Rector’s Warden,” and the “People’s Warden,” respectively. The rector and the churchwardens together form a “Corporation.” The Corporation is the body responsible for the administration of the local parish, its building, and finances.

The people of the parish also elect members to a “Parish Council.” The Parish Council membership includes the members elected, an equal number of persons who may be appointed by the rector and a number of persons who are members ex officio, including the rector, churchwardens and elected delegates to the diocesan synod. The Parish Council is meant to advise the Corporation in financial and property matters, to make recommendations regarding the ministry of the parish, to assist in raising funds necessary for the administration of the parish and to act as a conduit of communication.

Anglicans generally know nothing of formal church membership other than baptism. The members of “Vestry” are all those baptized who regularly attend worship, are regular communicants, and who support the life of the parish financially and have reached the age of 16 years. The Vestry meets at least once a year to elect members of parish council, churchwardens, to approve financial statements, approve ministry budgets and to conduct any other business that it wishes in accordance with the canons.

Flexible Structures (With Room for Adaptation)

In addition to the structure laid out in canon law, parishes often adopt other structures that assist with administration and ministry. A parish might have any number of standing committees that report either to the Parish Council or the Vestry. At SJE the only functioning standing committee is a small Outreach Committee that formally reports to Vestry, but in practice relates well to both the Corporation and Parish Council.

For a number of years the functions of some former standing committees have been undertaken by more ad-hoc groups. We have only intermittently had a Stewardship Committee and at this present time a small group from both the Corporation and Parish Council are working well in this role. A small task force is working on growing the small group ministries of the parish. A small task force is working on children’s church. A ministry team organizes Messy Church. Two of our four other regular worship services have committees that meet infrequently. “Congregational Care,” which included a variety of functions from lay pastoral visitation to new member ministries, was also formerly a standing committee, then became a set of ministries organized by a coordinator, and is now a series of stand-alone ministries, connected to the rest of the organizational

structures of the parish through their relationship with the rector. The property committee is essentially defunct, and their responsibilities have defaulted to the Corporation.

Flexibility in the Inherited Structures

Although certain structures are prescribed in canon law dating back to the Christendom era, it is not required that same structures function in every way as they have in the past. While in the past existing church structures may have taken their cues from the top-down hierarchies of Christendom, the attitude of servant-leadership is now more the norm. While the churchwardens are given the keys (literally and symbolically) and the parish priest is called “rector” (from the Latin *regere*, meaning "ruler"), there is no reason why authority and power must be channeled as in the past. The legacy of the Christendom era was often that power and authority were wielded in ways contrary to the shape of kingdom of God. Church leaders have come to understand, better than in the past, that their role is to serve the kingdom of God and equip the saints for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Over the past three years the role of Parish Council at SJE has been changing. Rather than being merely a clearing house for ministry reports and for a second look (and sometimes second guess) at every decision made the Corporation or other committee or ministry team, the Council now spends much of its time in discerning the parish’s role in God’s mission. The spiritual practice of “Dwelling in the Word”¹⁸ has become a vital aspect of this spiritual discernment. As a result, the decisions and recommendations that

¹⁸ I was introduced to the process of “Dwelling in the Word” as part of CML 7512 at Luther Seminary. At SJE we follow the process at outlined at http://www.lancasterconference.org/pdf/Orientation_Dwelling_in_the_Word.pdf

are made by Parish Council are more missionally focused. At the same time, there is a perhaps also a greater awareness of the ways in which our shared life at SJE may be inconsistent or lacking in our missional calling.

Because of the renewed missional focus at SJE a missional shift can be observed in the inherited structures of the parish. The emphasis is no longer upon getting the business of the institutional “Church”¹⁹ done for its own sake, but in being (and becoming) the church we are called to be, a sign, a foretaste and a servant of the kingdom of God.

Rationale for Downsizing Structure

A Move Away from Christendom’s Hierarchal Structures

While the inherited and traditional structure in Anglican circles has been hierarchal, there have been many attempts to level the field. The liturgical renewal movement, together with the accompanied renewed emphasis upon the priesthood of all believers, the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches,²⁰ the movement towards the ordination of women, all had a role in leveling the old hierarchies.

The current structure and practice of leadership at SJE is much flatter than the inherited hierarchal form. Some of this structure works, at least partly on a complex web

¹⁹ I use the word “Church” here in quotations with capital “C” to denote an overly institutional Church, preoccupied with itself (consumed with “Churchy” matters) as basically inherited from the Christendom era.

²⁰ By “publication”, I mean not the mere publication, but the conversation and convergence around the themes in this influential report. World Council of Churches. Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 1st Canadian ed., Faith and Order Paper no. 111 (Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1983).

of relationships, similar to what Bolman and Deal describe as “Hegelson’s Web of Inclusion.”

Helgesen coined the expression “web of inclusion” to depict an organic social architectural form more circular than hierarchical. The web builds from the center out. Its architect works much like a spider, spinning new threads of connection and reinforcing existing strands. The web’s center and periphery are interconnected; action in one place ripples across the entire configuration, forming “an interconnected cosmic web in which the threads of all forces and events form an inseparable net of endlessly, mutually conditioned relations” (Fritjof Capra, quoted in Helgesen, 1995, p. 16).²¹

However, as Bolman and Deal point out, such a structure can be problematic;

“weaknesses in either the center or the periphery of the web undermine the strength of the natural network.”²² I will touch further on the difficulties at SJE below.

Changing Demographics in Congregation and Local Context

At SJE we have experienced a downsizing in much of our structure. Part of this has to do with changing demographics in the congregation and the local context. The people who served in the committee structures of the parish in the past are older now. Many of these same people no longer feel they have the energy or time to participate in the life of the parish in the same way. Changing health and family commitments are all part of this.

Many of our more long-time or older parishioners expect that a younger generation will serve in the church in the way that they have in the past. But many in the younger generation have a different expectation and relationship with the local parish. Unlike some of our older parishioners, our younger parishioners did not grow up in the

²¹ Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, loc. 2058-2062.

²² *Ibid.*, loc. 2063.

parish. Some do not expect to stay beyond a few years while, for example they complete graduate studies, or move on to a new job. The parish family is much more transient and fluid than in the past. Individuals and families are busier than ever before with multiple demands from work, school, family and church.

All of this translates into the fact that there seem to be fewer hours available where people are willing to serve in the ways that people formerly viewed as the way to serve the church and its mission.

SJE is tempted to view this situation as a technical challenge, however, as Anthony Robinson argues, this is more likely an adaptive issue.

While people are busy (it is practically un-American not to be),²³ people will find the time for what matters to them and for what energizes them. I suspect that, beyond busy-ness, too often the jobs we ask people to do are not life-giving precisely because they are about maintaining structures and systems for an era that ended thirty or more years ago. They are not structures that are doing truly engaging and important work in our new time. It is a little like maintaining an antiquated association or club that was very important to our grandparents. We may do it as a yearly task out of a mixture of sentimentality and devotion, but it is not where we live. This takes us back to purpose and to structures that are derived from a clear, compelling, and core purpose. Instead of having the proverbial tail (the structure) wag the dog (the purpose/mission), we must meet the adaptive challenge of making the dog wag the tail again.²⁴

Intentional Attempt to Down-Size Church Bureaucracy in Favor of Local Mission

A final explanation for the downsizing of SJE's structures has to do with an intentional move based on a perceived priority for mission. The missional ecclesiology that I articulated in "Missio Dei in Vicinia" gave preference to mission lived out in the everyday, ordinary lives of the members of the church.

²³ In the Canadian context, "busy-ness" might not be considered in terms of patriotic duty, but is normative nevertheless.

²⁴ Anthony B. Robinson, *Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 139.

At SJE we try to emphasize that the primary location in which we live out our Christian vocation is within our everyday, ordinary lives. By locating our vocation here we mean that our Christian life and mission are located primarily with our family, coworkers, classmates, and neighbors that we encounter every day.²⁵

At every opportunity, in sermons, in bible studies and in conversation I have emphasized the importance of understanding that the mission of the church is not located primarily in the “churchy” things we do, but in our life lived in the world, where we practice our Christianity in relationships, hospitality, economics, and in so many other ways.²⁶

In a recent sermon I argued that we should “stop going to church.” By this I meant that one obstacle that the mission of the church faces is that we continue to speak about the church as a place where we “go”, rather than as the people that we “are.”

This matters because the more that we associate the church with a place that we go, the more difficult we will find it to be the community that God has called us to be. If the church is just someplace that we go, it makes very few claims on our lives. We can opt in and opt out. We can go or not go depending on our mood. Indeed, this image encourages us to assume that if we “attend church regularly” we have done all that is expected of us.

But what if the church is more than this? What if God’s desire is to create a people willing to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ in every dimension of their lives? The claims of such a calling would go far beyond merely “going to church.”²⁷

²⁵ Anderson, “Missio Dei in Vicinia: The Mission of God in the Neighborhood: An Ecclesiology for the Local Parish,” 15.

²⁶ My views on this are very much influenced by, Dorothy C. Bass, ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 2nd ed. Kindle ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010); Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

²⁷ David J. Anderson, “The End of Church or Why We Should Stop 'Going' to Church” (Unpublished sermon, Church of St. John the Evangelist, Hamilton, ON). I borrow this idea from Kenneson et al., *The Shape of God's Reign*.

The claims of such a calling would also (I would add here) go far beyond merely sitting on a committee. As a result we have de-emphasized the importance of “churchy” service in favor promoting the Christian vocation in all of life.

Critique of the Current Structure

I would like here to offer a brief SWOT²⁸ analysis of SJE’s current structure and practices.

Strengths

Emphasis on Christian Vocation in Every Day, Ordinary Life

The simple exercise of describing the current structure at SJE reveals a number of strengths. One of these has to do with the empowerment of individual and families to live out their own missional vocations within their own every day, ordinary lives, in the context of their own home, their neighborhood, and their various community involvements. Anthony B. Robinson asks us to,

Imagine a church where the ministry is not done entirely — or even mainly — by the ordained minister(s) but by the baptized, the people of God. That ministry is *not* primarily managing the church; it is what lay Christians do in their own vocations and workplaces, in their relationships with others, in their participation as citizens, and in their daily lives. Could it be that the real job of dedicated Christians is not to manage the work of the ordained or the operational administration of the church facility, but to represent Christ to the world?²⁹

Kim Thompson, a parishioner at SJE, recently wrote about her experience of such Christian witness in the parish newsletter, *Wings*. “I had met both Judy Duncan and Judith Purdell-Lewis through my work and community involvement, two women who I

²⁸ SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

²⁹ Robinson, *Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations*, 140.

deeply admired.”³⁰ Kim’s separate experiences with Judy and Judith outside of any church program or ministry formed an important part of Kim’s experience of coming to and growing in the faith.

Such an emphasis also empowers Christian disciples to be engaged in the public square for the common good. “New Testament scholar Leander Keck spells out the implications of this for our time:

Put simply, the mainline churches must free themselves from the notion that they have a God-given responsibility for society, and instead claim the freedom to be influential participants in society by being first of all accountable to the gospel.”³¹

Christian Discipleship

Another of the strengths of parish ministries as SJE is that they emphasize Christian discipleship. Participation in small groups is encouraged and supported. The goal of these small groups is to help individuals, families and member of the groups together to sustain Christian practice in their lives or in other words, to grow as disciples and apprentices of Jesus.³² The shape of a Christian life is understood very much in terms of the shape of the kingdom of God and participation in God’s mission in the world.

³⁰ Kim Thompson. “My Struggle with the Christian Life.” *Wings*, April, 2014. http://www.rockonlocke.ca/Websites/rockonlocke/files/Content/1431795/Wings_spring_2014_revised.pdf (accessed April 1, 2014).

³¹ Leander E. Keck, *The Church Confident* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), qt. in Robinson, *Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations*, 159.

³² SJE’s understanding of discipleship has been influenced by John P. Bowen, a member of the parish, Professor of Evangelism at Wycliffe College, Toronto, and Director of the Institute of Evangelism. In his recent book he talks about the disciple as an “apprentice” and as the church as a “trade school.” John P. Bowen, *Making Disciples Today: What, Why and How ... On Earth?*, Wycliffe Booklets (Richmond, BC: Digory Publishing, 2013). See also Mike Foss’ “Church as a Culture of Discipleship” as described in Robinson, *Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations*, 101.

Outreach Partnerships

Rather than the parish organizing major projects on its own, it has a number of formal and informal partnerships with other organizations for outreach into the community. These partnerships include:

- **Hamilton Out of the Cold**, where many parishioners volunteer in serving hot meals to clients through the winter months;
- **St Matthew's House**, a multi-service agency in our city's most at-risk neighborhoods, where many parishioners volunteer in the food bank and in seasonal programs;
- **Micah House**, a home for refugees arriving in Hamilton, where a number of parishioners volunteer in various ways, and many offer financial support;
- **The Hill Street Community Garden**, a neighborhood project where public land has been made available for vegetable gardens, and where SJE is a partner;
- **The Mission to Seafarers**, an organization caring for seafarers who arrive in the Hamilton Port from around the world, where a number of parishioners volunteer; and,
- **The Canadian Friends of Hôpital Albert Schweitzer in Deschapelle, Haiti**, a hospital serving the needs of some of the most at-risk persons living in our hemisphere, where a number of SJE parishioners serve as fundraisers and volunteers who support the hospital, especially its childhood malnutrition and maternal health programs.

The obvious advantage in SJE engaging in these partnerships is that each of these organizations has resources for serving the particular needs that they address beyond what SJE could provide on its own. On its own SJE would not be able to undertake this type of work. Through partnerships, however, SJE is able to bring its own resources—especially human and spiritual resources—to the work. As such, SJE is able to join with others who are participating in what God is doing in our neighborhood, city and around the world (whether associated with the Christian faith, or not).

A Minimum of Church Bureaucracy

One of the strengths of SJE's current structure is that it has kept church bureaucracy to a minimum. In "Missio Dei in Vicinia" I noted that while the Liturgical Renewal Movement had the result that many people were involved to a greater extent in the liturgical life of the congregation, it sometimes had the negative effect of allowing people to think that their participation in the liturgy was the highpoint and sum total of Christian service. Instead of viewing all of life as an opportunity for worship, the Christian life was often reduced to a few hours on Sunday morning.³³ A similar effect came about when the move to empower lay ministry was combined with anti-clericalism. One effect of this move was the sense that if lay people were empowered to do the "churchy" things that only their clergy had formerly been engaged with, now lay people had arrived at their true Christian vocation. Some parishes seem to have an endless number of committees and meetings that many people attend. The local church may benefit from very well thought out decisions and excellent programs, but all of this can

³³ Anderson, "Missio Dei in Vicinia: The Mission of God in the Neighborhood: An Ecclesiology for the Local Parish," 4-5.

occur without any regard for the mission of God. It may also be debated whether the laity have truly been equipped for ministry, or sidelined by “churchy” involvements.

Weaknesses

While we might recognize the strengths I’ve listed above, we must also admit a number of weaknesses.

Lack of a Visible “Outreach” or Missional Program of SJE’s Own

While SJE parishioners are engaged in the mission of God in their own every day, ordinary lives and in various programs that are organized by our partners, SJE does not have any programs under its own administration that directly serve the wider community or neighborhood. SJE’s own programs are for those who are part of the worshipping community. This becomes a weakness in terms of SJE’s communal witness. As I stated above, Kim was able to see and admire the Christian life lived by both Judy and Judith as they lived their lives of service in the community. There is very little opportunity, however, for anyone in our neighborhood to observe that people of SJE are involved in any particular way as SJE. No one is able to say, for example, “St. John the Evangelist ... you are the people who run the food bank.” Craig Van Gelder reminds us that such a communal witness is vital from both a biblical and practical perspective.

The Bible assumes that living in service to one another and toward the world will be more than just individual actions; it will involve the corporate actions of communities. There is grace-filled power in the church’s communal acts of service.³⁴

This element is lacking at SJE. What is more, there is the danger that because of the lack of this sort of focused presence, SJE will be viewed as parochial and insular, so that the

³⁴ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, loc. 2330-2333.

community might say, “We don’t know who they are or what they do, but they seem only to be concerned about themselves.”

Lack of Good Organizational Structure and Processes

While we might celebrate a lack of excessive bureaucracy at SJE, we might also note that there is a lack of clear organization and process. SJE’s current organization structure is pictured in “Figure 1” above. While some of the parish’s committees and task forces are directly linked to other structures, such as the Corporation or Parish Council, others (those picture in diamond shape), are connected only through relationship to the rector or other key leaders. It is not clear, for example, how “Messy Church,” one of our new worship services, is linked into the structure of the rest of the parish. Because of this lack of clear structure and processes throughout the parish, communication difficulties arise. People are often unsure how to proceed when key decisions need to be made. The result is that the rector or churchwardens are often problem-solving various issues and this can in turn can lead to the perception (and perhaps, reality) that power is vested too tightly among a small group of people.

Opportunities

The combination of SJE’s strength and weaknesses, together with particular circumstances arising in the upcoming summer of 2014, provide SJE with opportunities for change and growth. With the support of Parish Council, the Corporation made an application to a federal government program that provides for subsidized youth employment by not-for-profit agencies. Our application was for three full-time workers who would identify needs and develop programs for three target groups: (1) persons with disabilities; (2) seniors; and, (3) persons with social and employment barriers (poverty).

These target groups were identified as important in our neighborhood by our Member of Parliament.

These students are intended to assist the parish in updating its own research and missional listening within our context. They are meant to engage with our parish family and neighborhood partners in developing programs with the various target groups. One of the goals of this program is in the development of relationships and activities that might be sustainable for SJE and its neighbors in the longer term.

Threats

Finally, at SJE we must come to terms with a number of potential threats or pitfalls that arise out of our current organizational structure and practice.

A Mistaken View of the Nature of the Christian Life and Vocation

It should be hard to conclude that at SJE we hold the view that the Christian life is primarily an individual matter. Nevertheless, our emphasis on discipleship and upon the vocation of Christians in their every day, ordinary lives could be distorted in this way. As Anthony Robinson warns,

we could become so focused on our individual discipleship journey or experience, or the church's mission of making disciples, that we forget that the church as a group or body is also important. We are more than a collection of individual disciples. We are, or seek to be, the church, the people of God and the body of Christ.³⁵

Failure to Realize Missional Potential

SJE is also in danger of missing a key aspect of its partnership with God's mission in the neighborhood. To repeat a phrase from Craig Van Gelder cited above,

³⁵ Robinson, *Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations*, 104.

“There is grace-filled power in the church’s communal acts of service.”³⁶ Our missional listening has made us aware of a number of needs in the neighborhood; we continue to discern the ways in which we might respond. A failure to respond as a community cannot be considered a viable option for a church community seeking to in God’s mission in the world.

Unsustainability and Exclusion

In describing SJE’s weaknesses in structure and processes above I noted a lack of clarity. I have also described the fact that our current structure relies heavily on the relationships (formal and informal) between various leaders, ministries and other groups. While it is possible that such relationships, when carefully managed, can form what Hegelson described as a “web of inclusion”, such a structure is extremely fragile. It depends upon strength at each point in the web so that weaknesses in the relationship in one place can affect the strength of the whole.

This lack of clarity also means that sometimes persons are unintentionally left out of the conversation by failures of communication or process. The “web of inclusion” becomes one of *exclusion*. Relying so heavily upon relationships rather than formal processes has sometimes meant that important conversations have not taken place resulting in impairment of the community’s discernment and unity.

³⁶ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, loc. 2333.

Open Tables: A Missional Framework

God's Open Table

Andrei Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity³⁷ has been an object of much reflection for those who think about the missional church. The icon depicts the three angels who visited Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18:1-15). The icon has long been read as speaking about the Holy Trinity, the three persons shown in mutuality, hospitality and invitation.

The great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen had this to say about this icon,

As the mysteries of the intimate life of the Holy Trinity are unfolded to us, our eyes become more and more aware of that small rectangular opening in front beneath the chalice. We must give all our attention to that open space because it is the place to which the Spirit points and where we become included in the divine circle. As I reflect upon it, with all the iconographic knowledge I have been able to gather, I come to the realization that this rectangular space speaks about the narrow road leading to the house of God. It is the road of suffering. While its four corners remind us that it represents the created order, including all people from north, south, east, and west, its position in the altar signifies that there is room around the divine table only for those who are willing to become participants in the divine sacrifice by offering their lives as a witness to the love of God. It is the place where the relics of the martyrs are placed, the place for the remains of those who have offered all they had to enter into the house of love.³⁸

As I reflect upon the icon and Nouwen's words, the image of the Trinity's table of open invitation becomes all the more important for reflection upon the missional church. The icon shows the movement of God's own self-revelation as Holy Trinity, and shows us that we are invited, as Abraham and Sarah were, to receive God's hospitality and to join in God's mission. As Nouwen points out, the open table and its open invitation does not

³⁷ Andrei Rublev, *Trinity*, 15th c. Tretyakov Gallery.

³⁸ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, 1st rev., Kindle ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2007), loc. 144-151.

invite us in just *any* direction. It is an invitation to a particular way of life, given shape in the life of Christ and known by the saints who have gone before us.

Christian worshippers gather with the purpose of engaging with God who always invites the stranger. But worshippers find themselves not only welcomed but drawn in and set free to be participants in God's mission in the world. As Patrick Keifert explains in *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*,

At each of these stages in the development of a ritual of hospitality, Christians understood their rituals of fellowship as rituals of liberation. In the meal fellowship, in church hospitality, in liturgical evangelism, as in the church's contemporary Eucharist, God is acting to liberate the Christian community to trust in God's promise, a trust that frees them to live always as hosts and members of a company of strangers. Ritual space and time are transformed by this image of guests gathered by a gracious host; worshipers enter an odd space and time to form an extraordinary community where ordinary social relationships do not apply. In the ritual of the table, guests may respond to the presence of the self-giving God, and explore and revise their public and private worlds.³⁹

This is to say that the encounter with God is transformative. It sends us out into the world free to engage the world in concert with God.

Tables of Encounter at SJE

One of the ways that we might think of the structures and practices at SJE in within a more missional framework would be to think of the various ministries and activities of the church as “tables”. Underlying each of these tables is the eucharistic table that invites us into relationship with God and sends us into God's word set free to join in what God is doing in restoring the world to wholeness. I outline something of the relationship of these tables in Figure 2, below.

³⁹ Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*, Kindle ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), loc. 744-749.

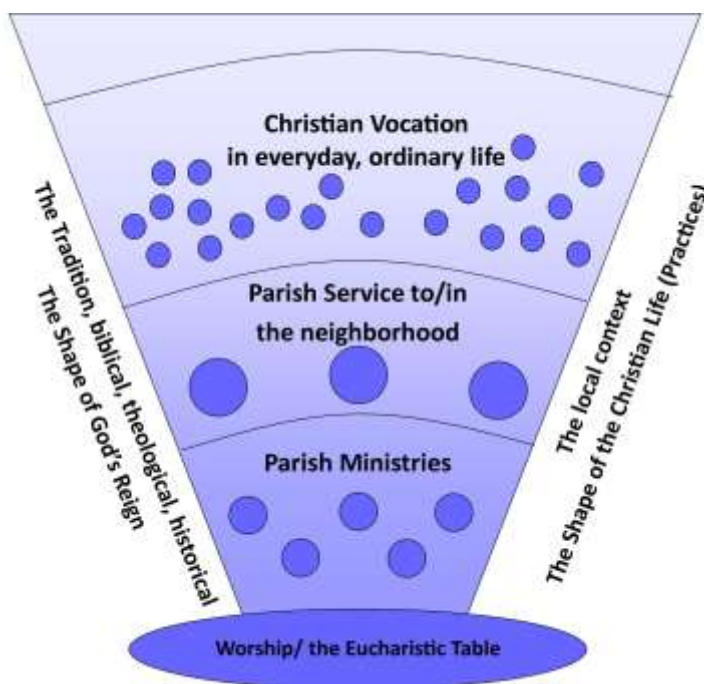


Figure 2: Tables of Encounter

At the eucharistic table the worshipping community is sent out to participate in God's mission, as a sign, foretaste and servant of the kingdom of God. As I have noted above, this response to the encounter with God has a particular shape. Figure 2 describes that shape as commensurate with four realities: (1) the shape of God's reign; (2) the Tradition (biblical, theological and historical); (3) the local context; and (4) the shape of the Christian life. These tables can be described as existing in four concentric, distinct spheres that exist in continuity with one another.

Worship and the Eucharistic Table

The first sphere centers on the actual eucharistic tables that are part of the worship life at SJE. I contend that the eucharistic table is at the center of the church's life and extends around other tables, those of the church and those in the community, where God

is present and working and strangers are welcomed, people are fed, and kingdom of God finds a place.

Meeting Tables: Parish Ministries

The second sphere includes key parish ministries that are integral for facilitating parish life. These include structures for organizing and planning worship, providing congregational care, stewardship of resources and parish outreach. Each of these is pictured in Figure 2, above as a table around which people come to organize and carry out the various ministries of the parish. Each one of these can be considered as internal to the parish and as a way of facilitating the parish's life of mission in the world.

Worship

The worship life of the congregation does not just happen. A number of resources come together to facilitate worship at the congregation's various worship services. Figure 3 depicts the parish's worship ministry as a table of its own but one around which a number of connected ministries and worship services exist as tables, or as places gathering and ministry in and of themselves.

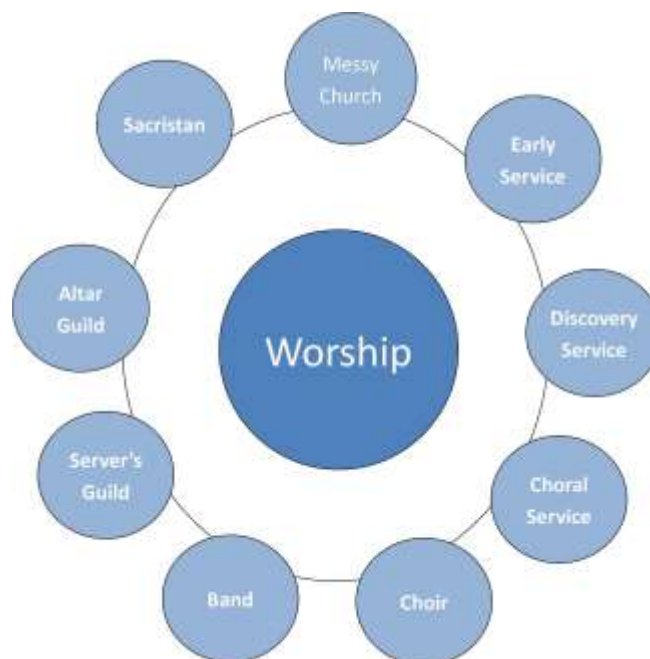


Figure 3: Worship

Congregational Care

Figure 4 pictures the Congregational Care table and its related ministries. These include a programs designed especially for our shut-ins or those who are ill or have other special needs, including, lay pastoral visitation, the organization of twice-annual luncheons for our seniors, our Paper Touch Ministry and the Prayer Team.

This table also includes ministries that contribute towards faith formation, including, our small group ministry, Children's Church, the administration of the various courses that are part of our Faith Formation Framework.

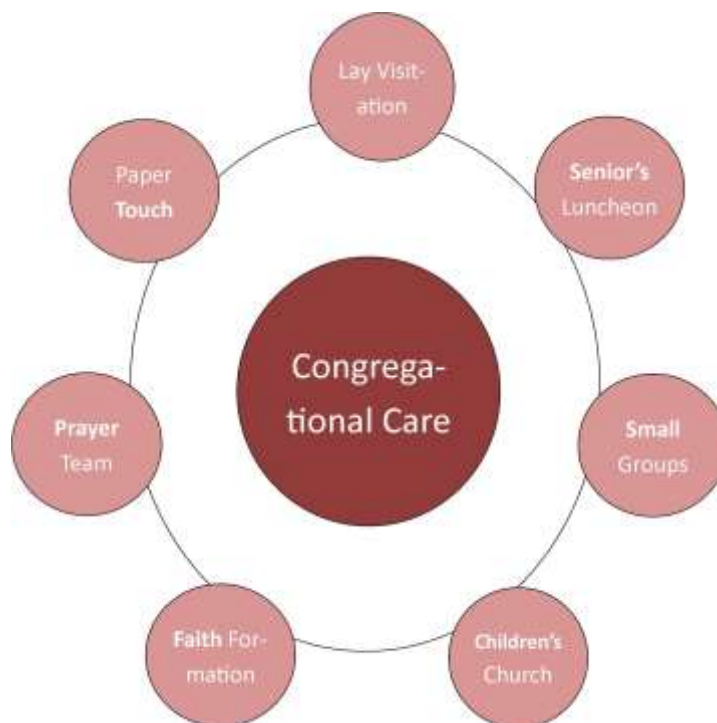


Figure 4: Congregational Care

Stewardship

The stewardship table brings together those who are involved in helping the congregation to grow in its culture of generosity, with those who are involved in raising environmental issues in the parish building and raising awareness of issues concerning the good stewardship of the earth beyond. The stewardship table also includes a group that stewards parish property, especially its buildings and a group that provides administrative support for communication in the parish.

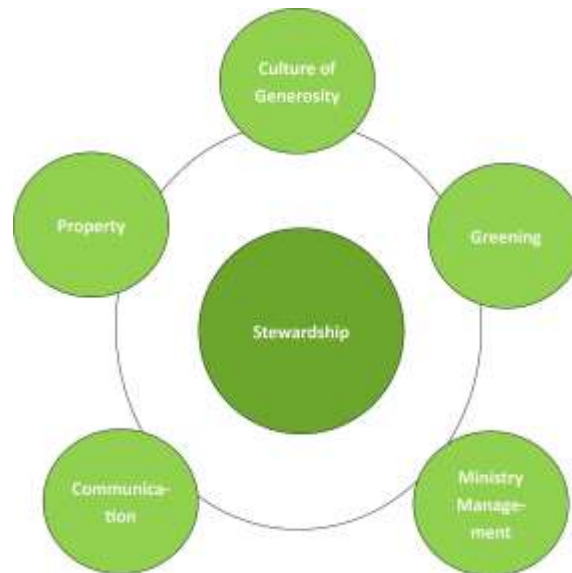


Figure 5: Stewardship

Parish Outreach

Finally, the parish outreach table is imagined as having two poles at this time. The first concerns the number of formal and informal partnerships that the people of SJE are engaged in at this time as well as one or any number of projects that the parish will discern in the coming months.

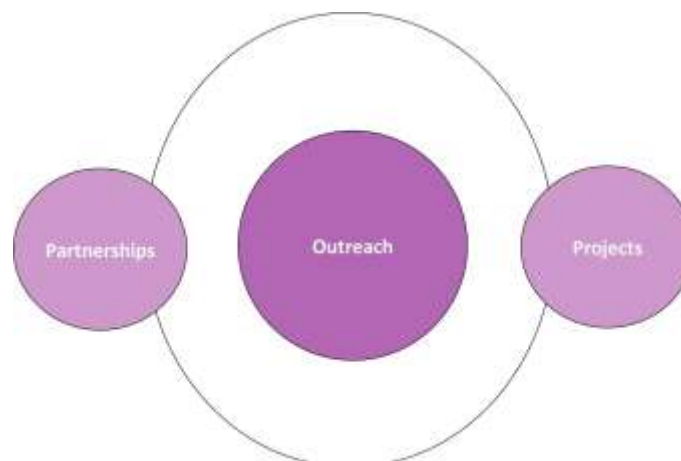


Figure 6: Outreach

It needs to be remembered that each of the tables above, while internal to the life of the parish, are meant to be in service of the parish mission in world. The tables described below are those more intentionally set in the midst of our neighborhood.

Community Tables: Parish Service to and in the Neighborhood

The third sphere described in Figure 2 includes tables of community in the neighborhood. At the present time this element is missing, although the table labelled as “projects” in Figure 6, above, anticipates that the parish will initiate such projects or relationships that will allow us to engage visibly as a community in the neighborhood. Craig Van Gelder’s words bear repeating a third time: “There is grace-filled power in the church’s communal acts of service.”⁴⁰

There is any number of opportunities for such service in our neighborhood. Our new Messy Church service has put us in touch with the needs that we identified in earlier research and missional listening concerning the needs of young families. We have heard about the social isolation among stay-at-home parents as well as the lack of adequate third space for community programs. The possibility of offering parenting courses or other services together with these young families may prove to be a real opportunity.

Our city also sees a number of newcomers to Canada each year. Many have needs to work on the English language and may perhaps have other needs connected with immigration status, refugee claims, etc. The parish neighborhood is adjacent to neighborhoods where many new Canadians live and again there may very good opportunities for ministry among them.

⁴⁰ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, loc. 2333.

The neighborhood also includes a number of group homes for persons with various disabilities. In the past we have invited these neighbors to special events at the church where the residents and staff have enjoyed a meal that the church has provided, sometimes along with a concert. Again, there may be real possibilities for service among these neighbors.

Kitchen Tables: The Christian Vocation in Everyday, Ordinary Life

The fourth sphere described in Figure 2 shows the relationship of Christian vocation of every Christian in the everyday, ordinary life. The kingdom comes as much around tables in kitchens, restaurants, coffee shops, school and the workplace as it does around any of the church's tables.

Where We Go From Here

Out of the discussion above arise two main proposals. The first has to do with clearer and more open organizational structure around four inter-related tables: Worship, Congregational Care, Stewardship and Outreach. The second has to do with the development of one or more visible outreach projects around multiple people at SJE and in the community can share, a visible sign of the church's presence in the community and of the reign of God.

Tables of Worship, Congregational Care, Stewardship and Outreach

These "tables" for the various areas of parish life may be organized in a number of different ways. One proposal could involve one of the churchwardens or a member of Parish Council serving as a convener of each table. Ministry leaders in each of the related areas might meet together occasionally if that is found to be beneficial, or the convener

may serve as a conduit for information to and from the Parish Council and with other tables. However these are organized, the goal will be to ensure clearer structure and open processes.

Project(s) of Parish Outreach

The second proposal has to do with a visible outreach project of the parish in the community. It is imperative that any project be undertaken from the perspective of the missional conversation. Church outreach projects have sometimes too often been moments when the church did something “to” or “for” the community, rather than “with” God “in” the community. The missional conversation reminds us that God is already at work in our neighborhood and that our challenge is in discerning how we can best partner with God in what God is doing and desires to do.

Next Steps

The first step in moving forward will be to distribute this paper for discussion among the Conversation Team that has been established in the parish for this program, seeking their input, critique and advice for moving forward. This paper may be adapted for further use in the parish based on their input.

The SJE Parish Council is the likely the group that is best placed to discuss and make plans for the implementation of these recommendations. It is imperative that Parish Council review the structural issues that have been identified and consider the proposals made here. Parish Council is in the position of being able best to discern exactly how these proposals might work and to carry out a process for their implementation, review and adaptation as the parish continue to discern its ministry into the future.

The parish already has a number of resources that will help it in these conversations, not only at Parish Council, but in wider circles. For example, Figure 7 below shows the Parish Mission statement in the form of a diagram, where the statement is broken down into meaningful phrases. The Mission Statement was first developed in 2003. Since that time the parish has gained new language and understanding in its missional conversation, but the statement remains helpful. Figure 7 includes some of the new language and understanding and can be offered as a resource as the parish discerns a new place of engagement “in vicinia.”

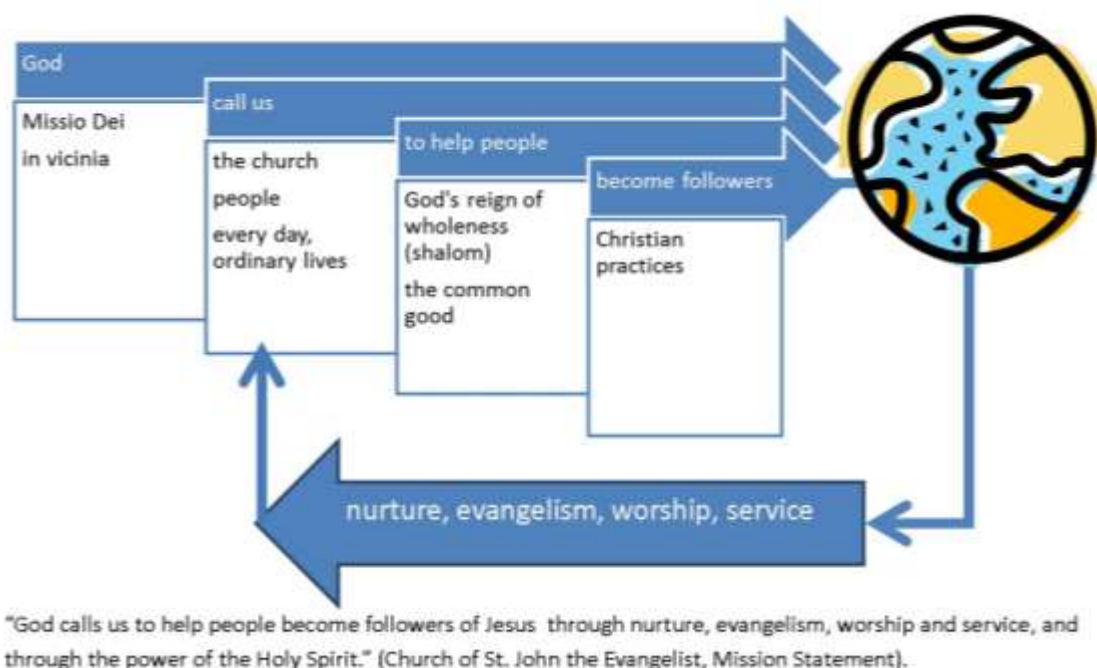


Figure 7: Parish Mission Statement⁴¹

During the upcoming summer the parish will have a unique opportunity as it works with its student hires and explores the missional opportunities in the neighborhood.

⁴¹ The Church of St. John the Evangelist, "Our Mission," The Church of St. John the Evangelist, <http://www.rockonlocke.ca> (accessed May 1, 2013).

It will be important to call the people of the parish to pray and listen as we engage our neighborhood looking to partner with God in what God desires to do.

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