

Grace Episcopal Church, Asheville, NC
Executive Summary of the Congregation Assessment Tool and Commentary
July 2019

The Congregation Assessment Tool (CAT) was recently administered in your church. Responses to the CAT totaled 160 representing 115% of average worship attendance. A response from every person is not required to provide valid results. For the complete results, please review the Vital Signs® report. A summary of that report is provided below:

I. Overview

Members at Grace are likely to focus on balancing an intellectually open and reflective faith community with structure and practices that provide external stability necessary for those seeking to develop and grow. These members are more likely to be comfortable with the path that each individual must follow with attention paid to important patterns of spiritual practice. For many, the Gospel is understood as an instrument with the power to transform, not simply comfort.

When the community is warm and hospitable, it has the potential to be a haven for those in need of healing or recovery. In a compassionate response to suffering, members may develop counseling centers, food pantries, homeless shelters, spiritual direction, support groups, and recovery services-often engaged in the front-line work of these ministries. They may struggle to balance the admirable tendency to accept people where they are with an adequate level of accountability that is also essential to wholeness and might tend toward overcommitment to meeting the needs of others which could result in burnout for some. Missional focus prevents work from devolving into just going through the motions of set activities and a loss of a sense of deeper meaning.

Others at Grace are more likely to be committed to a clearly defined faith lived out in a community with structure and stability. Members not only invite others into the faith, but also into relationship with all the expectations and rewards of family. It may be common to hear some folks talk about issues from a Biblical perspective more literally interpreted. For these members, faith is readily translated into guidelines for living where the line between right and wrong is bright and easily articulated.

When a Biblical mandate is perceived, this group of members is likely to be remarkably perseverant at serving those in need. At its best, the church helps these members explore the intellectual side of faith including the relationship of tradition to contemporary issues. This exploration may increase effectiveness in ministry by preventing detachment from the world around them. It is important to balance the drive for spiritual and moral clarity on cores issues with tolerance for one another minimizing the risk of demoralizing conflict. The church is likely to be most productive if it maintains a sharp missional focus and nurtures flexibility as the need for change arises.

II. Satisfaction and Energy

Overall, 33% of members are clearly satisfied with their experience in the church and 30% feel energized by the work and ministry of the church. The Satisfaction indicators are low relative to other churches and Energy indicators are within a more typical range though still on the lower end of that average spectrum.

When asked how satisfied and energized they are, members of Grace tend to focus on the issues addressed in the statements below. When they feel more positive in these areas, they are more likely to feel more positive overall. Conversely, when members feel less positive about any of the areas below, they may tend to feel less satisfied with and/or energized by their experiences in the church overall. Any area can be both a driver of satisfaction and energy.

Satisfaction Drivers:

1. The worship services at our church are exceptional in both quality and spiritual content.
2. The whole spirit in our congregation makes people want to get as involved as possible.

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3. The music at our church is outstanding in quality and appropriate in style to our congregation.
4. Clergy ensure the development of a plan to care for members with special needs.
5. Among most of our members there is a healthy tolerance of differing opinions and beliefs.

Energy Drivers:

1. The whole spirit in our congregation makes people want to get as involved as possible.
2. Our church provides opportunities for education and formation in a variety of ways so that I can find one that fits my complex lifestyle.
3. The worship services at our church are exceptional in both quality and spiritual content.
4. In our congregation the laity work with the Rector in leading and planning worship services.

III. Goals

As members look to the future, their top 6 goals are:

1. Make necessary changes to attract families with children and youth to our church.
2. Develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to reach new people and incorporate them into the life of the church.
3. Expand outreach ministries that provide direct services to those living on the margins of society.
(*unusually high in 3rd compared to other churches*)
4. Provide more opportunities for Christian education and spiritual formation at every age and stage of life.
5. Develop ministries that work toward healing those broken by life circumstances.
6. Strengthen the process by which members are called and equipped for ministry and leadership.

IV. Vital Signs

The *Vital Signs* report contains 10 indices, or thematic areas. The first two are *descriptive* in nature: Theological Perspective and Flexible Style.

Theological Perspective: On the whole, Grace Episcopal Church is theologically progressive. However, there is a broad range of perspectives regarding the role of Christian conversion in social change. This generates both challenges and opportunities. Can there be a more powerful Christian witness in our time than people who have different understandings on significant issues, yet have learned to worship, learn, love, and grow together harmoniously? This diversity is an area to consider as an asset to be leveraged in terms of identity and development of tolerance for differing viewpoints which has the capacity to sharpen focus and give more meaning and purpose to ministry.

Flexible Style: Developing the capacity to accept the need for change and strategically implement meaningful changes is necessary to engage the community and the needs of members. Some members at Grace appear to struggle with change and others are more adaptable. In general, it is those churches who have developed a "let's try it" posture that are experiencing growth. The congregation appears to perceive itself as more adaptable than it may actually be on the whole. Leaders will need to be courageous in the face of change and work diligently to connect change to valued traditions. Change should be implemented slowly after a well-articulated rationale and given due time to see the impact. Always build an evaluation into any change. Failure is only defeat if you fail to learn from it. Otherwise is it simply opportunity!

The next eight indices are *evaluative* in nature and are thus termed Performance Indices: Hospitality, Morale, Conflict Management, Governance, Individual Spiritual Vitality, Readiness for Ministry, Engagement in Education,

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and Worship and Music. Each of these indices is benchmarked against hundreds of other churches in the US to provide context. In other words, what do people experience in these areas at Grace Episcopal compared with what they might experience at another church?

Index	What it measures	Score relative to other churches in the US
Hospitality	The degree to which members perceive that the congregation is engaged in offering themselves and their resources to folks who are new, different or in need.	Low (12 th percentile)
Morale	The positive, passionate, and persuasive engagement of members in the mission of the church.	Low (29 th percentile)
Conflict Management	The degree to which members believe that conflict is appropriately managed, and where possible, resolved.	High (75 th percentile)
Governance	The degree to which members believe the decision making structures and processes of the church are open to their concerns and input.	Low average (39 th percentile)
Spiritual Vitality	The degree to which members believe that their faith is central to their lives rather than peripheral or episodic	Low (27 th percentile)
Readiness for Ministry	The degree to which the church has helped members identify their gifts and connect them to ministries that fit those gifts.	Low (30 th percentile)
Engagement in Education	The degree to which members understand that Christian education is a life-long process and believe the church provides developmentally appropriate opportunities and makes them accessible given the pace and schedule of members' lives.	Low average (33 rd percentile)
Worship and Music	The degree to which members have a vibrant worship experience.	Low (18 th percentile)

Additional Metrics:

Degree of Involvement Beyond Worship	High (72 nd percentile)
Value of Involvement Beyond Worship	Low (12 th percentile)

Hospitality Commentary: People generally expect that churches will be inviting and supportive communities. However, church communities have decidedly different “temperatures.” Some feel cold, others warm and still others-on fire! Grace appears to be struggling with its hospitality ministry, both among those within the church and in welcoming people from different walks of life. Additionally, most bear witness to lacking the skills and comfort level to effectively welcome guests. Hospitality is critical for growth and maintenance of relationships within the church. A warm environment is also essential to maximize the healing ministry potential of the church.

Morale Commentary: Members must find energy from their experiences with the church, be engaged emotionally, not simply conceptually or in dutiful behavior, and sense the need to bring others into the experience. At present, morale is low at Grace. Meaningful and suitable changes in worship and music are likely to result in positive changes in morale overall. Care should be taken to build consensus around these changes given the significant theological diversity. This is an opportunity to create experiences that are broadly appealing.

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Conflict Management Commentary: It is critical to understand that the tools required to deal with conflict go beyond good intentions, and involve specific training that nearly anyone can learn-if they choose to do so. Conflict is inevitable in any organization, including churches. However, how it is managed makes the difference between it becoming a risk factor for divisiveness or an opportunity for increased depth of understanding, respect, and fellowship. Although the church does not appear to be in active conflict, currently some members at Grace appear to be struggling with tolerance for differing opinions and beliefs within the church body. This specifically could be a limiting factor in the church's capacity to leverage its diversity. The governance scores below suggest that some unrest could be just under the surface.

Governance Commentary: In general, strong church governance is important since, among other considerations, it often serves as a buffer against divisive conflict. In these cases of strong church governances, leadership has developed the skill and trust capital to manage inevitable conflicts productively, creating opportunities for increased relational authenticity. Committees, commissions, task forces, leadership assemblies, and joint meetings expand the decision making circle. Regular opportunities for input can give people a sense of involvement in the way decisions are made. Grace members bear witness to some degree of struggle with the decision-making process, perceive a lack of openness to innovation, and feel that leaders are less representative of the whole than is typical.

Spiritual Vitality: The scores relative to individuals' personal spiritual journeys are low. Daily spiritual discipline is closely correlated with high Spiritual Vitality scores, thus the church may want to consider offering members teachings about different options for incorporating a daily spiritual practice. In general, it is important to note, that although it is certainly crucial work for the church to help members connect to God in meaningful ways, individual piety alone has little or no impact on the overall health of the church or on interpersonal relationships.

Readiness for Ministry Commentary: In the last thirty years, a shift has taken place in our understanding of ministry. Some churches call it lay ministry, some lay leadership, others, the ministry of the baptized. In each case, the concept is that all members of a church are called to ministry, and it is the responsibility of the church to help members identify their gifts and connect them to meaningful ministries that best fit those gifts. Fewer members than is typical are experiencing the church as a community that inspires involvement. Most believe this ministry would be significantly stronger if individual gifts were intentionally discerned and efforts in ministry were more strongly supported. Clarity of intention is important, and it could be that some feel they are going through the motions without a sense of mission, or there may be opportunities not yet considered that would be a better fit for the breadth of gifts in the church.

Engagement in Education: Christian education is a life-long process that enriches a person's spiritual life and better prepares him or her for service in the world. This ministry in particular is essential because this can be the pathway to the development of lay leaders and equipping folks for ministry that is meaningful and revitalizing. Members at Grace bear witness to somewhat low levels of motivation to engage in education and formation. This is an area to nurture; life-long learning is a key capacity in healthy churches. Part of this process should be exploring the best ways to make programming accessible and defining what characteristics constitute high quality.

Worship and Music: The worship experience is central to the vitality and growth of a congregation. While members are often engaged in a wide variety of activities, worship is the one experience that every member

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shares. Research suggests that worship is a primary factor in the morale of a congregation and when the worship experience of a congregation is vibrant, members also tend to feel energized about the work of the church. Both the music ministry and worship experience at Grace are in need of renewal in an effort to find what more members are seeking as a source of revitalization and spiritual direction.

Final Comments: Grace appears to be at a pivotal moment. Satisfaction and energy appear to have waned. This can be a barrier to growth and maximizing the significant opportunities inherent in your diversity. However, the dissatisfaction can also be leveraged as the necessary motivating factor for change if it is. If leaders and members engage in an experimental approach to life in the church, you will begin to see options that you may not have considered to this point.

HCIC research identifies five promises that congregations want their churches to make and keep. Roughly 90% of what people want in their churches can be attributed to its ability to make and keep these five promises.

Promise #1:

We will create a church where worship experiences are exceptional in their ability to inspire, engage and enrich our spiritual lives.

Promise #2:

We will create a church experience where involvement is good for the soul instead of leading to disillusionment or disappointment.

Promise #3:

We will create a church experience where every person understands the significance of his or her life in the universe and is supported in fulfilling the purpose for which they were born.

Promise #4:

We will create a church experience where people live in peace with one another by resolving conflict in ways that are respectful and restorative.

Promise #5:

We will create a church where persons experience leaders who listen deeply with open hearts and make courageous decisions with good intentions.

As members look to the future, there are three questions they may find compelling:

1. Who are we that is unique in the community and in the world?
2. What is our preferred future?
3. Are we ready to be courageous learners?

All the information in this report should be explored and validated in further conversation. Survey data is not the end of a conversation but the beginning.