

LISTENING REPORT

November 21, 2021

**St. Peter's Episcopal Church
Weston, MA**

REPORT USAGE STATEMENT

It is important that this report be recognized as an internal planning document. Intrinsic to its value is its candor, which is absolutely essential in assisting the leadership of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Weston, MA to make informed and faithful decisions about current and future ministry plans. This report includes general references to responses from congregation members gained through the MAP interpretation, interviews and listening groups, as well as information gathered from two Community Engagement Panels. It also includes recommendations from Kairos based on this input, along with additional congregation analysis and professional experience. This report should not be regarded as a promotional document designed for general distribution. Rather, it should be used as a significant resource among key decision-makers of St. Peter's Church to plan appropriately for the future.

ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES

The leadership of St. Peter's Church engaged the services of Kairos and Associates to help develop a ministry plan that specifically looks at the current functioning of the congregation, its health and vibrancy and leadership systems. After conversation and collaboration between the Vestry and clergy, a decision was made to enter into a formal strategic planning process.

St. Peter's is in a time of discernment as it faces diminishing participation and financial giving, a local community that is well-resourced in many ways but a congregation filled with people who are busy and, to a large extent, over-extended. Questions were asked about the level of alignment between lay and pastoral leadership regarding expectations for vibrant ministry and the attendant skill sets needed to cast a vision and lead the congregation forward in new ways. The pastoral leadership and Vestry believe this is a good time to look at the future.

They agreed to engage Kairos and Associates, a firm that requires a time of deep listening to congregation members as part of the planning and discernment process. Pastor Elise Brown from Kairos and Associates implemented this assessment with the following foci: 1) What is the perception of members at St. Peter's about the congregation's strength areas, growth areas and gap areas?; 2) What is the level of passion and energy of the congregation for St. Peter's mission and ministry?; 3) Is there a clear sense of mission and purpose at St. Peter's?; 4) What is the level of alignment between the lay and clergy leadership of the congregation?

The results of these findings will be included in the strategic plan adopted by the Vestry and, ultimately, the full congregation of St. Peter's Church. This is just one part in a much larger planning process; the findings and recommendations identified in this Listening Report come to the full congregation for prayerful reflection, discernment and feedback, with the hope of identifying 3-4 priority areas that could be included in the strategic plan.

THE PROCESS

There were four major components to the Listening Process. The first was initial leadership engagement. Kairos communicated with key leaders and staff to get a deeper understanding of St. Peter's vision for ministry and begin to develop a focus for the Listening Phase.

The second component was conducting the MAP on-line survey and providing professional interpretation of the results. The MAP Survey was implemented during July and August, 2021. The response to the on-line Missional Assessment Profile survey was strong. A total of 70 respondents completed the survey. The interpretation was given to the Vestry, staff and Listening Team leadership on September 28. St. Peter's also participated in a Leadership Systems Inventory (LSI) tool that was taken by 21 lay leaders and staff. The interpretation of the LSI was provided to the Vestry and staff on Monday, November 1.

The third component was conducting individual interviews and Listening Groups. Specific criteria were established to invite as many members from as wide a range of involvement, age, family configuration, gender and perspective as possible. This was done to ensure diversity and broad based input from the whole congregation. 44 people engaged in this component, with a fair representation of newer and long-time members of the congregation. Interviewees included several families with children and youth. Interviews were conducted on-site at St. Peter's on August 25 and 26. Additional interviews were scheduled in September for people who were not able to participate in August or who were added to supplement the list created by the Listening Team.

The fourth component was listening to the community around St. Peter's. Two Community Engagement Panels were planned and implemented involving 11 invited community leaders. These panels were held on November 11 and November 14 at St. Peter's.

Panelists included:

Thursday, Nov. 11th at 7:00pm

John Gibbons, Principal, Weston Middle School

Daria Gere, Executive Director, WATCH

Julie Secord, Executive Director, Wayland Council on Aging

Alyson Muzila, Weston School Committee and Founder of Green Team

Kristin Barbieri, Publisher of Weston OWL

Mignonne Murray, Executive Director, Weston Council on Aging

Sunday, Nov. 14th at 11:30am

Chief Sean Gibbons, Acting Wayland Chief of Police (Wayland Officer for 20 years and long-time Wayland resident)

Chief Michael Goulding, Weston Chief of Police

Ripley Hastings, Weston Town Moderator

Joe Welby, Director of Athletics, Weston Middle School and Manager, Wayland Swim and Tennis Club

Don Pierson - First UU Church, Weston

These panels provided rich conversation and engagement by St. Peter's in the local community. Not only was it important for St. Peter's to host these panels, but it is imperative that St. Peter's positions itself as a strong, active and engaged leader in the local community to improve its visibility and prominence. The most vibrant congregations we work with have a strong, visible presence in the community. We encourage conducting Community Engagement Panels as a way for congregations to strengthen and deepen their ties and leadership in the community.

Some primary takeaways from the Community Engagement Panels are the need for greater collaboration between organizations, the income disparity between people living in Weston and Wayland, and those in Waltham, the need for affordable housing, the growing older adult populations in Weston and Wayland and their unique needs (like transportation assistance). Several ideas were shared about possible intergenerational programs and what sort of programs might attract young people and children. St. Peter's facility was mentioned as a place where events drawing the entire community could be hosted. There was consensus about the desire to serve people, reaching out together beyond individual organizations and into the broader community:

LISTENING PHASE OBSERVATIONS

As mentioned above, the purpose of this process was to gather meaningful input and information from the St. Peter's faith community to give the leadership of the congregation the ability to make important decisions about moving forward with revitalized energy and mission. The comments shared below are general perceptions and reflections that emerged out of the broad based input that was gathered. It isn't meant to be declarative as much as reflective of the spirit and sentiment that is held among the people of St. Peter's.

MAP Points of Interest

The beginning point of the Listening Phase was to get a baseline understanding of the culture and impact the ministry is having. The MAP Interpretation gives a general overview of excitement, sense of belonging, connectedness, ministry effectiveness and capacity for moving forward. The following are key points of interest that came out of the MAP Interpretation.

•STRONG UNDERLYING MESSAGE OF “I LOVE MY CHURCH!”: St. Peter's is deeply loved by its members, both by long-time members and newcomers alike. People have shared significant life events in this place and there is a deep sense of loyalty and commitment to its mission and ministry. The congregation is filled with people who are deeply committed to the congregation, have raised their children here and have experienced life-changing relationships with others in this place. This finding corroborates many stories shared in the interviews about the congregation showing up for people in times of profound loss and need. It was the church family that provided the most significant support to many people during times of need. This deep love and gratitude translates into a sincere desire for St. Peter's to thrive into the future.

•HIGH LEVEL OF FAITH MATURITY AND FAITH INTEGRATION : A core component of a church's mission is to help equip and nurture people to live out their faith in all aspects of their lives. This is understood as “faith integration.” The members who took the survey demonstrate they are people who understand that living as a child of God is not just a Sunday experience, but something that is integrated into the whole of life.

•STRONG POTENTIAL TO GROW EDUCATION AND FAITH FORMATION

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADULTS. Although the faith maturity and faith integration at St. Peter’s scored high on the MAP, participation in faith formation opportunities did not. There seems to be a gap between adult faith formation activities and strong engagement in these offerings. This raises the question about what St. Peter’s is offering to people, where and when, and how faith formation opportunities might be enlivened and strengthened to encourage more engagement. It should be noted that several opportunities have been offered to adults for faith formation and spiritual growth but attendance at these offerings has been low. Creative and bold visioning is needed that moves beyond the familiarity and sameness of previous eras in the life of the congregation. Congregations today must ask the question, What draws 21st century, overly committed and over-extended people into a meaningful and transformative relationship with Christ? What possibilities exist beyond the walls of the church, offerings that create open pathways for the newcomer?

•WORK IS NEEDED IN AREAS OF RESPECT, TRUST AND PERMEABILITY FOR A MORE ROBUST RESPONSE TO THESE AREAS:

There was a larger percentage of “undecided” and “disagree” responses in these three areas. It comes out as both a communication issue and decision-making issue. The survey and interviews revealed people have questions about how decisions are made, by whom and how they are then communicated out into the congregation. The MAP also revealed a sentiment that differences of opinion are not necessarily encouraged at St. Peter’s. Further, while responses were strong regarding the belief that St. Peter’s is making a difference in the world through its ministry, individual members don’t reflect the same sense that they are valued and have a strong “place” in the functioning of the congregation. Some newcomers have experienced St. Peter’s as a difficult congregation to find their way into. This is an area where St. Peter’s could invest some energy around hospitality, welcome, inclusion and deepening a sense of belonging for newcomers.

•ENERGY, VIBRANCY AND URGENCY: Similarly, Ministry Practices and Clarity of Purpose show a pooling of responses toward the middle or “Neither Agree nor Disagree.” In addition, there is a high sense of the need for changes to be made at St. Peter’s, but a low sense of urgency to undertake these

changes. The MAP tools look for strong affirmation of each statement which translates into energy and vibrancy for the ministry and mission.

Overall, the MAP for St. Peter's had a lot of "Neither Agree nor Disagree" responses rather than "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" responses. This was an area of the MAP where issues surfaced around who casts the vision for the ministry, and then provides the energy and leadership to move the vision forward. No one person can do this on their own, but central, clear, focused and energetic leadership is always needed in an organization that truly wants to experience growth and ministry impact. Here is where the alignment between ministry needs, expectations of the congregation and leadership skill sets must be examined and evaluated to see what is possible and how greater energy and vibrancy in the ministry can be effectively employed.

It should be noted that there was both a high response rate for the MAP survey, the interviews and focus groups, in the middle of the summer! This reflects the strong work done by the Listening Team who were tasked with setting up the interviews, reaching out to people and getting people plugged in and engaged. The Listening Team made intentional calls to individuals encouraging their participation. This targeted outreach was very effective. People responded and wanted their voices to be heard in this process.

•GREAT POTENTIAL FOR STRENGTHENING THE CULTURE OF GENEROSITY IN THE CONGREGATION: The MAP revealed people have confidence in how the finances are managed at St. Peter's. There is trust in the financial systems. Many people I interviewed have been involved in the stewardship work of the congregation and have worked very hard to help congregants learn and grow in their understanding of giving and that making a financial commitment is a spiritual commitment and an act of worship. That said, there has been concern about the finances of the congregation for some time now and several members who were interviewed indicated that strengthening the finances at St. Peter's needs to be a key priority in this process. It should be noted that the people of St. Peter's are well-resourced but aren't necessarily feeling the motivation or inspiration to give more strongly to St. Peter's.

•**MISSIONAL IDENTITY:** It is important for a church to convey a sense of who they are and for what purpose they exist. For St. Peter's, there is a clear sense people love the church but are not completely clear about the church's mission, how the mission is both defined and implemented and where the vision-casting and central leadership to live out the mission is happening.

•**POSITIONED ON THE BORDER BETWEEN STATIONARY, PUZZLED AND NOSTALGIC:** St. Peter's finds itself in a unique location on the MAP - right on the edge between three quadrants. We were able to tease out some of these areas in the one on one interviews, the content of which follows.

Interviews and Listening Group Observations

As was stated, the MAP was our starting place to gather a baseline measurement of the culture and its missional impact. From there we are able to go deeper into discovering more specifically what is behind the data. Doing one on one interviews and hosting Listening Group sessions provided the opportunity to gather more qualitative input for greater clarity and understanding of the current state of the congregation. The following is a general summary of those conversations.

AFFIRMATIONS:

•**CARED FOR FACILITY:** People are pleased with the property upkeep and are proud of how the exterior of St. Peter's looks in the community. They are grateful for dedicated staff volunteers who take such pride in the building and grounds. Excellent Property Committee!

•**PEOPLE CARE FOR AND HELP EACH OTHER:** This was addressed earlier and is consistent with what was shared during the interviews. People at St. Peter's enjoy being together. They appreciate and value social gatherings, particularly those hosted at people's homes. They also value events that engage the community like the Tree Lighting that take place "on the lawn" so the community sees life and activity happening at the church.

•**MUSIC PROGRAM:** This is a priority for a lot of people. They appreciate the strong tradition of good music at St. Peter's. There is also an openness and desire for a variety of music forms that can engage a broad base of musical tastes and styles.

•**PASTORAL CARE:** Many people mentioned that when they were in need or experiencing a health issue or personal crisis, Lynn was there for them. They feel she cares about them and what's happening in their lives. Particular affirmation was made for how Lynn conducts funerals, memorial services and baptisms.

AREAS FOR ATTENTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

St. Peter's finds itself at a crossroads in its life and history. The following are recommendations we believe can directly impact St. Peter's effectiveness in moving forward with its mission and ministry. It should also be noted that every congregation has areas that need attention and greater focus. Those identified below are not an all inclusive list, but specific areas that were drawn from the interviews that should be considered in this planning process.

•**PANDEMIC** - The effects of the pandemic cannot be overstated in this process. 18 months of changed habits and routines have affected church life and participation everywhere. This is the time for an every home visit effort, or some sort of concentrated outreach campaign to every household to re-engage people and reconnect them to St. Peter's after a very long hiatus. We also need to ask the question - how engaged was St. Peter's with people during the pandemic? Were there creative ministry offerings to keep people connected with each other?

•**CONCERN FOR THE CHURCH SCHOOL AND MINISTRY TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH** - There are active memories of times several years ago when the Church School was strong and the presence of many families attracted people to St. Peter's. That has significantly shifted in the last 10 years. There seems to be an openness to looking at new models that might engage families, youth and children more effectively.

•**INTERGENERATIONAL MINISTRIES** - St. Peter's is a multi-generation congregation. Grandparents are playing a larger role in their grandchildren's lives than ever before and are very active in their faith formation. As our society becomes more intergenerational, so should our church ministries and programs. While age-segmented ministries still have a place in our churches, we encourage 6 generation congregations like St. Peter's to begin to build out ministries looking through an intergenerational lens so everything can be seen as having potential to involve the entire family.

•**WORSHIP**- While people are very appreciative of the worship and music life of the congregation, there is a longing for the services to be more engaging and inspiring. Let me be clear that I am not advocating viewing worship as performance. Worship should be prayerful and challenging, but also inspiring and providing tools to help people live their faith throughout the week in all aspects of their lives. We share a profound centeredness around liturgy and Sacrament, the importance of strong, scripture-centered preaching and an acknowledgment that worship is truly the work of the people, meaning the whole congregation.

•**INVITATIONAL OUTREACH** - a MAP finding was that people aren't inclined to invite friends or others to worship at St. Peter's. Again, some might say "this is just the way we are. We don't do that." I want to challenge St. Peter's to be more than this, and rise to a shared challenge. If St. Peter's wants to grow and thrive into the future, it will need to rely on something more than people "happening into our doors." If there is a concern about the core membership of the congregation and/or worship attendance, this is the responsibility of the entire congregation, not just the rector, staff members or a few core leaders of the church. Communities of faith need to be shaped, trained and taught how to be welcoming and invitational. It doesn't just happen. Some focused attention on invitational outreach would be a good use of ministry time and planning for St. Peter's.

•**VISIBILITY IN THE COMMUNITY - PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL**: When people were asked if the community around St. Peter's knows what is going on here, there was a lot of uncertainty about the answer to that question. The website needs to be seen as a visibility tool, and a tool for both inreach and outreach. There could be some concerted effort to make the larger community around St. Peter's more aware of the ministry, both physically and virtually, offering ways for people outside of the existing faith

community to get involved. Again, this will take some focused work and creative thought, asking questions like, “How do people in the larger community around St. Peter’s get information about what is going on in the local community?” “What do people read?” “What captures people’s attention in this community?” And how do they “find their way” into this community? Again, this is what we call “permeability.”

•**MINISTRY LEADERSHIP** - A consistent concern expressed was about a lack of volunteers to keep various committees and ministries going. People wonder who is coming up behind them to help take the reins. This same sentiment was expressed by several leaders in the Community Engagement Panels. Some people expressed that “We need more people to do some of the jobs we have been doing forever.” This is not a compelling reason for newcomers to get involved. People need to feel in some way touched or transformed before they are going to want to jump in and get involved. But the concern about the diminishing number of people willing to serve is leadership was noted by several people.

•**FINANCIAL CONCERNS** - St. Peter’s is experiencing a structural deficit that is growing. This is paired with several strong households pulling back from or withdrawing their annual pledge. This is a critical issue that needs to be prioritized. Hard questions are going to need to be asked about how St. Peter’s can not draw as heavily from its endowment, or do year-end “asks” to bridge a deficit.

•**TENSIONS IN CONGREGATION** - I need to mention that there are tensions and anxieties in the congregation related to disappointments about or low-confidence in people’s belief that change can happen to move St. Peter’s in a direction of growth. Several people spoke about this in the interviews and I need to name it in this process. I am going to work with the Vestry to make some suggestions as to how support can be provided for these tensions. We never lay the responsibility for growing a church at the feet of any one person because it takes a whole church working effectively together to create change and foster growth. Strategic plans are “all hands on deck” efforts and we need to ensure we have the energy and leadership, both clergy and lay, to effectively move a strategic plan forward.

•**HOPE ALL AROUND** - When I look at St. Peter’s, your community, your congregation, the strong leaders you have here, their commitment to and love for this church, I see hope all around. This is not just

pollyannaish thinking. St. Peter's has a distinct role to play in this community, something different from First Church UU or St. Julia's. Here you are, centrally located on a major intersection with this beautifully cared for facility. You were able to get 11 community leaders to come and participate in Community Engagement Panels. You have leaders in this congregation who have led major efforts in the corporate world with great success and energy. How can we harness all of the giftedness that is here, right here, into a plan that we can get behind together?

And let's end on the "why" of all of this. We are doing this because of our belief that an encounter with God changes people. We do this because we believe the Holy Spirit is active and wanting to work through this congregation to be the hands, the feet, the heart, the voice of Christ in this community. That's what this is all about.

It's an honor to work with you.

With Gratitude: Kairos, along with Pastor Elise Brown, is grateful for the opportunity to have served St. Peter's in this Listening Process. We are committed to following through with the leadership to see that the above recommendations are evaluated by the whole congregation and used to create an effective long-range ministry plan for St. Peter's. The steps needed to accomplish this will be developed with the Vestry and Staff beginning immediately. The congregation will be invited to be actively part of the next steps.