

## CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT MEETING - SATURDAY, AUGUST 27, 2022

At a congregational discernment meeting led by one of the Diocese of Virginia's four facilitators for congregational development, several members of Good Shepherd Church learned that the number of people who consider Good Shepherd to be their church is likely to be far larger than reflected by the average Sunday worship attendance of 12-16 people.



Rev. Cynthia McKenna shared this surprising insight at a two-hour Saturday morning meeting on Aug. 27 attended by 12 Good Shepherd members. A graduate of a two-year program at the College for Congregational development Rev. McKenna used a series of exercises to illustrate how people become more closely connected with a church and to help identify Good Shepherd's areas of strengths and weaknesses.

She opened the meeting by saying the purpose of the church is "to reconcile people to God." Using a diagram made up of concentric circles and entitled "Formation in Community," she explained that people move from the outermost circle of being "vicariously connected" to the second circle of "loosely connected" to the third circle of regular Sunday attendance, and then finally to the core of being a vestry member or holding other church leadership positions.



Rev. McKenna further explained that those who are "vicariously connected" are people who consider this church to be "their church" but whom we probably don't think of that way. These people might include neighbors who live near the church, or people whose extended families have had weddings, funerals and christenings at the church. She encouraged us to think of Good Shepherd as being comprised of a larger number than just the people who are regulars on Sunday morning.

The "loosely connected" are the people who show up occasionally and who may have discovered something they like more than a Sunday morning service. In the Episcopal Church, anyone who attends three services a year is considered a member, a fact that was a surprise to some attendees.

The way that people move from the outer circles to the inner ones is through relationships; feelings of welcome, warmth, connectedness, peace and authenticity promote closer relationships.

When Rev. McKenna asked us to list the ways that Good Shepherd engages with the community to draw people from the outer into the inner circles, everyone seemed surprised by how long the final list was: about two dozen activities and outreach efforts throughout the year – from the requisite Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday services, to free BBQ and ice cream socials in the summer; caroling at retirement homes and handing out gift tins at Christmas; regular monthly donations to support the local FISH food pantry and occasional drives to collect coats and baby supplies for local charities; participation in community efforts to provide warm shelter for the homeless in the winter and providing space for weekly meetings of a local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous... Rev. McKenna said the list was impressive for such a small congregation.



She also applauded the fact that our church building is always open. A lively discussion ensued as to the reasons that most churches today lock the doors when their buildings are not in use and why so many church buildings are empty and unused for much of the week. Senior Warden Lois Tapscott pointed out that even in our out-of-the-way location, the unlocked doors have led to some acts of vandalism, but that has not led Good Shepherd to re-think its open-door policy.

The second half of the meeting was devoted to a self-evaluation exercise that asked attendees to rate Good Shepherd's performance in four areas: Invite, Greet, Orient, and Incorporate.

The results on a scale of 1 (poor) to 6 (excellent) were:

- **Invite** (building, signs – e.g. The Episcopal Church Welcomes You, parking signs; brochures): 4-5
- **Greet** (worship norms; welcome – e.g. ushers who seat visitors with regular attendees who can help them use the Book of Common Prayer; hospitality; recognize newcomers at coffee hour): 5-6
- **Orient** (follow-up; orient around the building – e.g. signs for bathrooms; program activities; how to connect with clergy; spiritual formation classes): 3-4
- **Incorporate** (knit into the community; invite to baptism, confirmation; inquirers classes) 1-2



The final diagram that Rev. McKenna shared showed the three elements of Prayer, Service and Formation forming a circle with each element feeding into the other. In a brief discussion, there was general agreement that Good Shepherd was heavy on Service and needed to give more attention to Prayer and Formation.

The session closed with plans for a follow-up meeting in the spring.