

Feeling at Home in the Parish: A Real Sense of Belonging at St. Martin's

The Cloak, February 2024

If you were at the annual meeting this year, you might remember I talked about a research project that I conducted while I was a seminarian at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria. But having been encouraged to write about it and elaborate a bit, here is my *Cloak* piece for February.

My home parish was in Pittsburgh, and that diocese required all seminarians — between their second and third years — to return to their home parish and carry out a research project related to their ministry goals in the years ahead. (Loosely related, I might add.) So I went back to Calvary Episcopal Church in Shadyside (a suburb of Pittsburgh, heavily populated with university folks from both Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh).

So sparing you the details, I designed an interview study, going into the homes of people who either remained active in the parish or those who had left. And as I mentioned at our annual meeting, the strongest finding based on statistical analysis of recorded interview material — that was rated and quantified by independent raters — was the following: Quoting from my final report to my committee was the following:

There was a single theme that came through from many that it was only when they became active in some smaller subgroup within the parish that they finally felt “accepted and at home.” In fact, one factor that had differentiated Actives from Inactives was the identifications of areas within which to contribute to the parish.

Now it is true that Calvary Episcopal was and is a very large parish, and it was relatively easy to feel “lost” in it. But I think the above finding still holds, despite the size of a particular parish. St. Martin's is a relatively small, niche church. But we have many ministries available to join — surprisingly many despite our size. So I ended my little presentation at our annual meeting encouraging those there that, if they had not yet engaged with a ministry, they consider doing so if they wanted to really “feel at home” at St. Martin's. And several of my fellow presenters at the meeting and some attendees in the parish hall added suggestions for them to consider.

So let me end by again encouraging everyone to consider where their particular interests and gifts might lie, and sign onto a ministry or two that will not only contribute to their sense of belonging, but also add purpose and meaning to their lives.

Blessings on all,

Sandi †

(The Rev. Dr. Sandra M. Levy-Achtemeier)