



The Work of the 2024 Task Forces

Task Force on Diocesan Sharing

The Task

This task force was appointed by Bishop Wright in 2024 to gather data throughout the diocese on parishes that do not have regular (every Sunday) access to the sacraments, particularly to the Holy Eucharist. We also assessed several experiments currently being conducted to make weekly communion available. This report is an outline of the process, the findings, and the recommendations for how we may share resources within our diocesan family of parishes. While the focus of this task force was on the availability of the Eucharist, we are mindful of the need parishes have for consistent pastoral care and administration when they are without clergy.

Guiding Scripture

The scripture that guided our work is from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), that begins with these words, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." We also recognize that in our polity it is the diocese, and not the parish, that is the smallest unit. When one part of the body is lacking, we are all diminished and it is our common purpose to support one another in Christ.

Process

Over the course of several months we explored the needs of the diocese through conversation and the collection of data. First, we listened to each other as the task force was composed of clergy, licensed lay ministers, and lay persons from different parts of the diocese. Our initial discussion revealed that some of us are already in parishes without every Sunday communion and some members of the task force were already engaged in experiments to provide solutions. We recognized that we were from many different convocations and that collecting data by convocation allowed us to use known relationships.

Our second step was speaking with deans of convocations to determine what parishes were without clergy, what those parishes were doing to address the need, and what challenges they faced due to geographic location within the diocese.

The third step was to reach out to clergy leaders within each convocation and to gather data around four questions:

1. What resources/flexibility for sharing clergy is available in the parish?
2. If it is a multi-clergy parish or if there are retired or non-stipendiary clergy: are they willing to supply, how far will they travel, how often, how early?
3. Are there licensed lay ministers who are available to assist; what is their availability?
4. If their parish is in need and has access to a Licensed Lay Minister (LLM) what would they want: preacher, worship leader, other?

The final step of data gathering was the assessment of the current experiments. What is working, what is not, what is needed?





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Findings

We found that the Diocese of Atlanta is in very good shape overall compared to other dioceses in Province 4, with only a small number of parishes currently (5-6) who do not have regular access to holy communion or are involved in one of the experiments. The most prevalent struggle is that of solo clergy to find supply clergy when there is a need due to illness or scheduled leave. We found that many parishes who have in the past been staffed with 2 or more clergy are now served by solo clergy. Even the large multi-clergy parishes do not have the number of clergy they did several years ago. For small, rural parishes it is a struggle to find clergy willing to travel to them to supply. Clergy and lay leaders reported that it takes an immense amount of time to secure supply clergy and often it is a struggle to find money to pay them for their services. There is also a severe lack of Spanish speaking clergy or bi-lingual clergy to supply.

While our diocese is weathering shifts in membership and financial challenges, it is imperative that we begin to address the future changes that will impact more parishes. It is prudent to begin planning now. The task force discovered that relationships between clergy and parishes are key to addressing these challenges. The current experiments in the diocese that are proving to be most successful have consistent clergy and licensed lay ministers leading and serving within parishes. The delivery of the sacrament goes hand in hand with pastoral care and presence. This is true even if that presence is less than every Sunday. We need strategies that involve parish lay leadership who are willing to discern long and short term solutions, transparency about financial limitations, and common goals about why a different model is needed in a particular moment with the needs of the particular context. We need to explore the needs of each community, how long an experiment is required, and a willingness to lean into regular discernment. This work can be done by parishes together with potential clergy or licensed lay ministers as they move forward together in ministry.

Resources

The Diocese of Atlanta is fortunate to have access to several resources:

1. There are multi-clergy parishes who are able to send priests to supply when they have time to plan, although there are constraints on distance and lead time.
2. There are some parishes who are employing part-time clergy and parishes that are sharing clergy with success. Some multi-clergy parishes have created relationships and share clergy on a regular/ongoing basis.
3. There are retired and non-parochial priests who are serving in long term situations on a part-time basis; this model may not be replicable everywhere and would require discernment and creativity to implement in a way that makes sense for different contexts and needs.
4. There are Licensed Lay Ministers (LLMs) who are not being utilized to their full potential to serve the church, even though they have been commissioned to serve in parishes with or without settled clergy leadership.

Using our convocational Structure:

Since Bishop Wright became our diocesan bishop he has been using the convocational system to organize the parishes of the diocese for strategic work in our local contexts. To that end the convocations are the place to begin to explore the sharing of resources. Many convocations are composed of solo clergy parishes and that is a challenge. The diocese is geographically large and as stated above the most successful models are ones that create relationships between parishes and clergy leadership.





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Other recommendations are:

1. A strategic plan for the deployment of Licensed Lay Ministers (LLMs) throughout the diocese to include:
 - o Communicating through Pathways who they are, what they have been called to do, their formation as LLMs, and their stories of being called to serve.
 - o A page on the Diocesan website with pictures, bios, sermons, availability.
 - o Publicizing the list of LLMs by convocation with contact information and where they are willing to travel, lead time required to prepare, and what gifts they have been licensed to share.
 - o Presentations by LLMs to convocations to share their stories to build trust.
 - o The creation of a guiding team of LLMs who will gather information for the communications listed above and encourage deployment.
2. Create clergy supply lists by convocation and with details from clergy willing to supply with how much lead time is required, how far they are willing to travel, and how many services on a Sunday they are able to lead.
3. Continue to experiment with clergy serving in part-time capacities, possibly supported by LLMs. This may include part-time or non-parochial clergy who work with more than one parish. For example, if we had retired clergy or those in non-parochial ministries who have Sundays open, and who could serve a parish on a regular basis (a couple times per month), building relationships while ensuring sacraments and pastoral care are done together.
4. Create relationships with surrounding diocese for parishes on our diocesan borders for utilizing supply clergy (need to ensure that they are compliant with Dio Atl standards)
5. Create relationship with Evangelical Lutheran Church in America synod for sharing clergy resources. Begin considering possible partnerships with the United Methodist Church.
6. Explore models available from other denominations..

The following clergy and parishes are involved in experiments to provide support to parishes who would not have regular access to the sacraments:

1. The Very Rev. Grace Burton-Edwards of Saint Thomas, Columbus has two associate clergy who are engaged on Sundays with Saint John's, West Point, and Saint Mary Magdalene, Columbus.
2. The Rev. Ben Wells of Saint Francis, Macon with LLMs is engaged with Saint Christopher's, Perry, Georgia. Father Ben celebrates at the parish on a rotation, and on other Sunday mornings, an LLM takes reserved sacrament directly from a Eucharist at Saint Francis to Saint Christopher's using a liturgy approved by Bishop Wright.
3. The Rev. Harriett Simmons, a retired priest, is the Priest in Charge to Saint Andrew's, Fort Valley and works three Sundays a month. Lay leaders in the parish lead Morning Prayer on the fourth Sunday.
4. The Rev. Reid Hamilton is the priest-in-charge of two parishes, Saint Alban's, Elberton and Saint Andrew's, Hartwell who share a priest in a 25/75 split.

Based on conversation with members of these parishes, we see that these experiments are successful and parish leaders are hopeful that the relationships will continue as they discern if and when they will be able to have a full or part time clergy person.





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I am grateful for the members of the task force who listened to the concerns of convocational deans, parish clergy, and lay leaders to understand the current needs within the diocese. The recommendations in this report provide information for the next task force to implement strategies and to run further experiments as we care for one another in the Diocese of Atlanta.

Respectfully submitted by:

The Rev. Buddy Crawford, Chair

Members of the Task Force:

The Very Rev. Grace Burton-Edwards

The Rev. Reid Hamilton

Ms. Maxine White-Levy

Mr. Jack Setters, LLM

Mr. Philbert Smith, LLM

Mr. David Stooksbury

The Rev. Bonnie Underwood

The Rev. Ben Wells

Mr. Craig Wilson, LLM





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Task Force on Exploring New Worshipping Communities

Task Force Charge: Explore possible new Episcopal communities within the radius of the diocese in light of area growth, needs, and feasibility of the nearest Episcopal church.

Overview of Task Force Work Plan: Members of the Task Force met and discussed in detail the work plan, meeting dates/times, frequency of meetings, protocols for meetings, access to a Task Force google document drive, protocols for notes from each meeting, and a guided discussion on the book, “Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured A Nation” by Kristin Kobes Du Mez. We agreed the work would consist of a two prong approach for gathering and analyzing data relevant to the assignment. Members agreed to begin with a quantitative analysis of areas of possible consideration in light of the Task Force Charge. Once the quantitative data was analyzed and agreed upon, the next phase would focus on a qualitative approach to gather and analyze data to better inform the final outcome with recommendations.

Quantitative data and analysis: With the use of the MapDash software, areas in middle and north Georgia with little or no Episcopal presence were noted. the closest Episcopal Church was noted and some were interviewed about insights into and bandwidth for a future project involving them. Each member of the Task Force took one of the identified regions and collected data through interviews using Neighborhood Missional Intelligence Reports, as well as economic, demographic, and population reports obtained from Census.gov and Data.gov. Further data was gathered on each area from county, city, and municipal reports contained on various websites throughout the state, county, and cities. Analyzed data produced a chart of population change within the diocese from the greatest to least along with travel distance to closest Episcopal church. Percentage change was used to rank areas and the Neighborhood Missional Intelligence Reports afforded a more local look at the factors within each area. The team generated a phase I chart of assets and needs analysis of each of the areas studied. Once the team had completed this phase of data gathering it produced ten possible areas of further research. The list of ten was divided among the members of the Task Force and used to guide the next phase of research.

Qualitative data and analysis: Team members gathered peer-reviewed published studies to compile a list of “best practice” questions to ask to determine each areas assets and needs, local Episcopal Church resources/capacity, the unique intersection of Episcopal identity with community values, as well as general questions to facilitate deeper conversations while allowing the “bubbling’ up of any fears, hopes, and desires. These questions primarily came from organizational change theory. It was agreed each Task Force member would use a general sampling of political leaders, religious leaders, business owners, local Episcopal churches, and citizens/people in this phase of research. As each member gathered and analyzed data the final two columns of the guiding chart document were completed. We discovered a column of general information needed to be added. In this column we placed responses we heard from people when our own denomination was mentioned. The next three meetings of the Task Force were the sharing and discussion of the research findings listed in the chart.





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Based upon the research and findings the Task Force recommended 4 out of the 10 geographical regions as best possible areas to initiate a possible solution to address the desert of Episcopal presence within the diocese. The areas identified were Oconee County, City of Forsyth, Dawsonville, and Ball Ground. The next phase of study was to ascribe possible attainable outreach strategies for the four regions. The list generated was as diverse as the areas of study and yet uniquely attainable in the overarching need for the redefinition of community in light of the tremendous change due to population growth in each area. At the Task Force final meeting, all research findings were reviewed to ensure validity and reliability of results and that the recommendations were reflective of all the work.

This report, which outlines recommendations for next steps, concludes the work of the task force.

Recommendations

Based on our data, discussions, and compiled research, we recommend the following:

Recommendation #1: Continue exploring the areas of Oconee Co., City of Forsyth, Dawsonville, and Ball Ground for planting new worshipping communities.

Recommendation #2: Spend time and resources on strengthening any and all existing diocesan communities through Faithful Innovations, an existing resource in the Diocese of Atlanta. Close-by Episcopal Churches to the identified areas can assist in the development as Faithful Innovations bolsters their alignment with what the Spirit is doing in their own local context.

Recommendation #3: Use the following tools

1. The Off-line Club. Phase 1 would be to create relationships in the 4 locations recommended by using the Off-line Club format.
2. Faithful Innovations. Phase two would include Faithful Innovations as a format for the newly created community. This employs a resource for making connections and solidifying the idea of “the church in the world” instead of “the church in a building.”
3. Community of Hope, International. Phase three uses The Community of Hope International, another existing resource in the Diocese of Atlanta. As a worshipping body takes shape, the CoHI model emphasizes living in community and commitment to prayer and service.

Action to Be Taken: The Task Force asks for the adoption of its recommendations, which includes continued use of Faithful Innovations as initiated by the new trainers and Community of Hope International, as well as initiating a formatted plan for implementing the Off-Line Club for disbursement in all four locations. Some members of this task force expressed interest in continuing with assistance in that program’s development.

List of the Task Force Members:

- The Rev. Laura Masterson, St. Mary and St. Martha
- The Rev. Deacon Julie ONeill, St. George’s
- The Rev. Devon Smyth, St. Margaret’s
- Diane Hodgins- St. Clement’s
- Molly Wilkins- St. James
- Sally Ulrey- Office of the Bishop, Canon for Congregational Vitality





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Task Force on Mental Wellness

The Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta's Task Force on Mental Wellness was created by Resolution 23-3 that was passed at the 117th Diocesan Annual Council in November 2023. Since its inception, the task force has been meeting at least once a month to research and discuss the mental health challenges that face the people of our diocese and the resources that are available to help.

The task force has researched and compiled a list of recommendations to the Diocese of Atlanta including widespread training in **The Keep Watch Project**, **Mental Health First Aid**, and **ASIST**. Additionally, we would like to continue the work we have begun in order to collect more information from the worshipping communities in Middle and North Georgia. We would like to survey the leadership of our worshipping communities as well as various commissions of the diocese to gather input on what resources are currently being used and what are perceived as the biggest needs of our parishes when it comes to mental health resources.

This additional time would also allow us to further investigate how the mental health resolutions passed earlier this year by the General Convention will be implemented across the church (Mental Health Sunday, Mental Health First Aid training, etc) so that the Diocese of Atlanta's efforts are aligned with those of the national church.

The full list of recommendations currently being made by this Task Force are appended to this report. Our hope is that the information garnered by the aforementioned survey will help us to supplement and refine this list before the 119th Diocesan Annual Council in 2025.

It has been a real blessing to work with this amazing group of people, all of whom are passionate about this work and how it can benefit people living with mental health challenges.

Respectfully submitted,

The Rev. Jess W. Speaker, III
Chair, Task Force on Mental Wellness





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Task Force on Mental Wellness - Recommendations

- Create a template for a handout containing mental health resources to include national and regional resources. The template should also be easily customizable for parishes to be able to add resources local to their area. This document would live on the diocesan website in multiple places so that it is easy for clergy, laity and visitors to the website to find.
- Encourage parishes, especially those with predominantly minority congregations, to identify and access resources and therapists that are tailored to the unique needs of their communities.
- Promote the resources that were developed by the national task force and approved by the General Convention regarding the connection between mental health and the Christian faith.
- Provide a suggestion list for how churches who have no mental health initiatives yet might begin to bring these issues to the attention of their parishes.
 - Examples:
 - A list of people who can be resources to parishes
 - Conversation starter packet to launch discussions in the parish.
 - Information about “What is a mental health challenge vs. a mental health crisis vs. pastoral care needs?”
- Encourage parishes to acknowledge specific mental health challenges for their congregations and seek resources to address those (ex: ABC Parish has a wide community of LGBTQ people in its community. What specific needs are required for mental health support for this specific challenge?)
 - Veterans, young members, LGBTQ+ Episcopalians, Episcopalians of color, neurodivergent Episcopalians, and those in senior or assisted living communities etc.
- Increase social media (at least) activity on/around mental health awareness days at the diocesan and parish levels.
- Provide a collect and Prayers of the People for Mental Health Sunday or any other time.
- Encourage Mental Health First Aid training across the diocese, especially for clergy and postulants. Training could be provided as a diocesan event, or at the convocation or parish level and should be made available to clergy and laity.
 - Mental Health First Aid is an evidence-based, early-intervention course that teaches participants about mental health and substance use challenges. The course is a daylong training that can be offered in-person, online or both. For more information, go to <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/>
- Encourage Keep Watch Training in parishes in the diocese. Training could be provided as a diocesan event, or at the convocation or parish level and should be made available to clergy and laity.
 - Keep Watch was written by Holle Tubbs and Dr. Mary Chase Mize in 2022. Grounded in both faith and science, it is a learning tool for Christians around suicide causes and prevention. The book is available online at the link below and training is available based on the text. For more information, go to <https://episcopalatlanta.org/keepwatch/>
- Encourage parishes to participate in an ASIST suicide prevention training. Training could be provided as a diocesan event, or at the convocation or parish level and should be made available to clergy and laity.
 - Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) is a two day workshop where participants learn how to recognize when someone may be thinking about suicide, and how to provide a skilled intervention and develop a safety plan with the person to connect them to further support. Participants will also have an increased willingness, confidence, and capacity to provide suicide first aid. For more information, go to <https://livingworks.net/training/livingworks-asist/>





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Task Force on Disability Justice

Flipping the Script: Disability Justice in the Diocese of Atlanta

Our Task

Our task has been to gain a fuller picture of the progress toward disability justice in the diocese. We quickly refined our goal from progress to awareness, since we found that people were unsure of the meaning of disability justice. For many if not most people, disability justice is the same as accessibility. While most people in the diocese have at least a broad understanding of accessibility issues, for most non-disabled individuals disability justice begins and ends with a ramp into the building. So our task has been to:

- 1) broaden that understanding
- 2) listen to the experiences of the disabled within our diocese
- 3) explore and share the gifts, perspective, and rights of the disabled in the church and outside it

Our Actions

Our primary goal, therefore, has been one of education. The starting point has been a visitation mission to all parishes in the diocese willing to host someone to talk, teach, and preach about disability issues. At the core of that conversation is the belief that disability theology is an integral part of incarnational theology. In other words, a right understanding of disability leads us to a right understanding of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Since most often, people's understanding of disability comes from cultural biases instead of from Scripture, they often read Scripture (and especially the healing narratives of the Gospels) through the lens of that bias, meaning that the discrimination that the disabled regularly encounter also waits for them inside the church doors. Our goal has been to flip that script, so that people in the diocese – abled and disabled alike – can instead understand culture through the lens of the Gospel.

Our second action has been to conduct interviews with some disabled individuals in the diocese in order to produce a short film that can be distributed widely throughout the diocese. The purpose of the film is literally to put a face on disability, letting the disabled tell their own stories in all their incredible richness and variety. We want to challenge people's ideas of what disability "looks like," and to start conversations about viewers' own experiences of and encounters with disability. It is our hope that this film will inspire more disabled folk to come forward to share their experiences, so that this film project can be the first of several.

Our Discoveries

The gap between what the Church as a whole knows and what the Church needs to know is wide indeed – wider in fact than we had thought at the beginning. There is a surprising and deep-seated reticence when it comes to discussing this issue, and a general lack of understanding of the place of the disability rights movement in the history of our nation and our church. A crucial gap is in clergy training. Even though disabled Americans account for around twenty percent of the population, many clergy and lay leaders have received no formal training of any kind in their understanding of disability, no guidance on what language to use, and few examples of best practices in pastoral interaction with disabled individuals.





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Task Force on Disability Justice

Our Recommendations

1. Our chief recommendation is to begin **teaching clergy and lay leaders** about disability: the history of the disabled rights movement, the identity and language of disability culture, and the complex relationship between disability and Christian theology. This would take the form of an in-person or (preferably) Zoom workshop and training, which could provide continuing education hours for those who need them. Most importantly, this training would equip our clergy and lay leaders with the language, knowledge, and pastoral sensibility that will support them in their ministry.
2. The immediate work that needs to continue is **parish visitation**. From that visitation it is our hope to expand the numbers of the task force, so that every deanery will have at least one person able to speak and educate about disability, and to advocate for disability justice. As the word of our project spreads, we hope to expand the membership of the task force to include more voices from throughout the diocese. As that membership widens, so can our reach: parishes that want to learn how their spiritual lives can be enriched by an understanding of disability justice would have a deeper bench of speakers, teachers, and preachers on which to draw, and our work could fan out through the diocese.
3. Finally, we recommend the development of a **Bible study or other “portable” study curriculum** that can be shared with congregations who wish to begin looking at the words of Holy Scripture about disability. This curriculum could guide those groups or parishes who are not able to have a visitation or attend a training session.

In sum, this work is just beginning. Our church and our culture as a whole have been slow to understand disability or to grapple with disability in justice, identity, or theology. The Americans with Disabilities Act became law, and disability became part of the national conversation, just thirty-four years ago. But even though we are at the beginning of this work, we have discovered that people in our diocese are eager to learn, hungry to do better, and excited to connect the lessons of their neighbors’ lived reality with the reality of the Gospel. Good conversations are happening; we just need more of them.

Submitted by
Rev. Mary Grace DuPree, Chair

