

St. Stephen's Church Celtic Service Reflection Groups
Summary Report
September 2023

Background and process

During the month of August, we held seven focus group conversations – six in person and one on Zoom – inviting reflections and feedback from participants in the Celtic service at St. Stephen's Church. In total, sixty-eight people took part, and five additional people gave feedback over email without participating in a formal group.

The original spark for this idea came from an awareness among the clergy staff that the combined changes and challenges of a pandemic, a rector transition, and significant staff turnover were deeply felt by some members of the evening community, and without some of the regular outlets for communication and feedback that exist on Sunday mornings (e.g. the Sunday Forum, the Annual Meeting, etc.). The stated intent of these listening sessions, therefore, was to provide a chance to check in with a cross-section of members of our evening community. Specifically, we wanted to invite reflection on the core values and foundational elements of the Celtic service, and hear how parishioners' experience of the service (along with our other evening offerings) is aligning with those values. We also made a few tweaks to the service this past year, and this was a chance to hear input on those and provide more clarity and conversation as needed.

Each session was facilitated by a lay parishioner – either Susan Wilkes or Allison Koschak – and a rotation of clergy members took notes. The sessions all featured the same set of prompting questions:

- 1) What are you longing for spiritually that brings you to the Celtic service at St. Stephen's?
- 2) What do you value most about the worship experience at the Celtic service?
- 3) Some of the core principles of the service include its contemplative nature and its inclusive welcome. Is there anything about the service that feels dissonant with those principles for you personally?
- 4) Another core principle is the invitation into community. What is your experience of the evening offerings following the service (i.e. the Sunday supper, Trailheads, and Compline)?

- 5) How do you see your connection with the larger parish? How could we help you connect more deeply to the life and ministries of St. Stephen's?

The full list of responses to these questions would fill a book, so we captured them graphically in a word cloud. A word cloud features larger font sizes for words that came up more frequently in the notes, giving a sense of the most common themes and areas of meaning and resonance threaded throughout the seven sessions.



Blended summary of reflections and feedback

The most consistent and clearly articulated values about the Celtic service are **inclusivity and welcome**, which draw people into the community, and a counter-cultural emphasis on **silence and grace**, manifested in the beauty of the physical setting, the musical soundscape, and the pace and flow of the liturgical elements (silence, language, and movements). Many offered deeply personal and yet communally shared expressions of numinous experiences and encounters with divine presence. A number of respondents specifically cited the communion invitation as a tangible symbol of welcome, along with

the assurance that there is no right or wrong way to participate. Another constant refrain was the spaciousness provided by the service, through periods of silence, beautiful and meditative music, and meaningful rituals of candle-lighting, healing, and communion. These elements combine to give parishioners a chance to breathe and reflect, a rare opportunity for rest and renewal in the midst of the busyness of life. Many participants described their experience of the Celtic service as the most real, or grounding, or important part — a reset, they said — of their weekly rhythm.

Participants in all groups shared thoughtful concerns about two elements of the service: **music** and **announcements**. Participants reported experiencing some hymns as out of step with the core values articulated above due primarily to traditional language and length. There is a desire for hymns that are anchored in the imagery of Celtic spirituality and for reintroducing Taizé chants into the service. Additionally, while there is deep appreciation for the outstanding quality of musicianship across all styles of music offered, some reported that the instrumental focus has shifted a bit toward classical selections and away from Celtic/Irish/Scottish-inspired tunes (though some did note an appreciation for the Asian composers featured recently). Regarding pre-service announcements, comments focused on the tension between affirming their importance in welcoming (a core value) with their length and new location, which for some interrupts the contemplative flow at the beginning of the service. There was also a feeling from some that the announcements, music, reflections and other elements contributed to the service running longer than it should.

Several respondents noted an appreciation for the **reflections**, and they like that lay members are invited into that practice. A few noted a concern with the length of the reflections. Some longed for a bit more interweaving of the poem, the gospel reading, and the reflection so that there was a thread to follow through the service; others didn't mind the variety even if the various pieces felt disconnected.

Relatively few participants discussed the introduction of **baptism** in the spring. Those who did mention it expressed widely divergent experiences. Some said that the rite disrupted the contemplative setting and that the language may be uncomfortable for some. Others were deeply moved by the ritual and welcomed its infrequent inclusion.

When asked about the evening offerings that follow the Celtic service, many said they cherish the community that they find in the weekly **supper**. There were several affirmations of the spirit of hospitality and welcome that is organically present around those tables. Those who have experienced **Compline** are equally effusive about its extraordinary beauty. All agreed that it is a great gift that we offer to the community.

While the new **Trailheads** formation offering that launched last year was generally well-received, there is a desire both for small-group offerings and topic-based series rather

than disconnected presentations. A few noted that such programming segments the supper community, but those who participated welcomed opportunities to connect with others around stimulating content offered at a convenient time (i.e. the evening). Overall, participants expressed a sense of connection with the wider parish and also shared a range of interests and needs for small-group opportunities for all ages and more “on-ramps” for young adults. Some perceive a divide between the morning and evening worshipping communities. Some expressed an appreciation for the tension of having a Celtic (non-traditional) service in the context of a larger traditional parish. Some expressed a desire to actively bridge the “divide” by engaging with the morning community and distributing the post-session report to the whole parish.

Concerning the Celtic reflection sessions, participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share directly with church leaders their deeply held convictions, hopes, and concerns and also valued meeting and listening to others through the process.

Responses and next steps

The facilitators and notetakers were uniformly struck by how deeply resonant the Celtic service is for those who participated in these sessions. Many of the participants spoke of the service and the whole evening community as transformative for their lives and their faith. It was a clear affirmation of the central place that this service has in the life of St. Stephen’s and it only underscores our shared commitment to helping it flourish and grow along with our other accompanying evening offerings.

The concerns and suggestions that were raised were thoughtfully expressed, and we want to offer a few responses and next steps in reply. The differing opinions about the placement of **announcements** at the beginning of the service form an example of what happens when two core values come into conflict. Reflection group participants who were newer to the Celtic service really valued that early expression of welcome and hospitality, but for more seasoned participants, those announcements sometimes constrict the value and experience of silence and contemplation.

There is no easy solution to this. For now, the clergy staff likely will keep the announcements where they are but will aim to shorten and streamline the script, relying more heavily on the written instructions in the bulletin. We also may experiment with placing the announcements first, followed by the prelude music, to provide a better re-entry into the flow of the liturgy following the opening words of welcome. The good news is that we all affirm these two core values and will work together to emphasize them throughout the service and the whole evening.

In terms of the **music**, it may be helpful to know that Brent te Velde and Diana Chou, our wonderful music directors, plan music for the Celtic service based on an elaborate

matrix that seeks to identify a target tone, length, and style for each of the many musical selections that go into every service. There has also been careful intention over the past several years to preserve continuity in the balance of styles and genres represented in the service in order that its musical complexion would not be altered in spite of changes in music personnel. This has included the creation of a music catalogue and organization of a music library specific to the service, which has preserved music that was offered throughout the service's life since it was introduced at St. Stephen's. The plans for each individual service have sought to remain inclusive of classical music from multiple time periods, music inspired by folksong and traditional hymnody, and contemporary or "New Age" music, and Brent and Diana have further diversified the repertoire within these larger categories.

The clergy and music staff will work together to review the matrix used for music planning and consider tweaks where feasible to respond to the parishioner feedback. This includes a review of hymns, music genres, and the tone or length of musical selections, while also continuing our commitment to diversifying our catalogue of compositions from under-represented communities. The collection of congregational hymnody sung at the service has remained essentially unchanged since the service was introduced at St. Stephen's, and may especially benefit from review.

One example of a possible change is for a Taizé chant to become the regular source of congregational singing at the end of the candle-lighting period. While this has been our practice for many years for the service in the season of Lent and at other times, this may become a more standard approach throughout the year. Using a Taizé chant here rather than a hymn would be in keeping with the meditative moment of that part of the service and would also allow people to participate in the singing even while waiting in line to light a candle. One important note is that music is planned a few months at a time, so it may be a matter of weeks before we are able to introduce any changes.

Celebrating **baptisms** at the Celtic service was probably the most significant change introduced in the last year, and it's interesting that it didn't generate more conversation in the listening sessions. It may be helpful to restate the reason for this change. The clergy feel that it is very important to emphasize the connection between the two core sacraments of our faith – Holy Baptism and the Eucharist. Clearly, the open invitation to communion resonates deeply with worship participants, and our desire is for them to see those words as part of a broader invitation into the transformed life of grace that is at the heart of baptismal theology. Celebrating occasional baptismal liturgies is also an important way that we connect members of the evening community to the broader congregation of St. Stephen's – because baptism is a communal sacrament through which we welcome people into the Body of Christ and the life and faith of our whole church.

We plan to continue to celebrate occasional baptisms as part of the Celtic service. We will aim to frame those liturgies within the contemplative ethos of the service, and we would encourage you to watch the recording of the first baptismal service last May. Whenever possible, we will aim for the baptismal candidates to be adults or children whose parents/grandparents are people who have an affiliation with the Celtic service. The next baptism is scheduled for Sunday, October 15. Beyond that, as of now, we are planning to offer two to three baptismal opportunities in the Celtic service in 2024.

We will continue to prioritize **reflections** by lay members of the worshipping community; remember that we are always looking for new willing reflectors! At the same time, we will aim to schedule a member of our clergy staff as a reflector an average of once per month. These dates will often coincide with particular feast days or special days in the church year, or when there is an especially challenging gospel passage appointed for the day. This is in keeping with current practice and also with the historical pattern under the leadership of prior clergy.

Speaking of clergy leadership, we are mindful of the importance of gender balance among our worship leaders. A few respondents raised this issue in the reflection sessions. Diversifying the altar party can be a challenge with our current clergy staff composition of only one female priest, but we work hard to schedule female subdeacons, eucharistic ministers, healing prayer ministers, lay readers, and reflectors, so that the whole body of worship leaders provides a more diverse picture.

One final note about the liturgy is that we will continue to be mindful about the length of the service – through attention to the announcements, music, etc. – while also honoring the gentle pace and spaciousness that people value so much. One way parishioners can help is by keeping reflections concise.

We are glad that the **Trailheads** formation offerings seemed to underscore a desire for more formation opportunities in the evening. While we do not have a schedule set for this fall, we do hope and intend to introduce some small groups and topical series that will respond to that desire and allow for those who are interested to go a bit deeper in content and community. For example, we hope to provide series or short courses on contemplative prayer, Celtic spirituality, etc., along with small group offerings aimed at newcomers or those seeking spiritual companions. These may develop over the course of the fall and into the winter/spring; please stay tuned.

Additionally, we plan to provide occasional opportunities – once or twice in the fall and again in the spring – for parish leaders to provide critical updates and opportunity for conversation about matters of importance in the life of St. Stephen's. The presentation of this report on Sunday, September 24 is an example of such an opportunity. Another will come in mid-October, in conjunction with the launch of our annual giving campaign. Yet

another may be an annual report in conjunction with our Annual Parish Meeting in February. Our hope is that these occasional offerings will provide a new avenue for communication that has not always existed in the flow of the evening schedule.

One final note: all that happens every Sunday evening only happens with the significant ministry of **volunteers** – from the worship set-up teams to the healing prayer and eucharistic ministers, from the supper preparation teams to the readers and reflectors. We are always in need of more volunteers to share the load, even if you can only help on occasion. Please let us know if you would like to help serve in some capacity to sustain these ministries that mean so much to so many.

Thank you again to all who took part in this process. Thank you for your honesty, faithfulness, and dedication. We look forward to celebrating together the next chapter of life in the evening community at St. Stephen's Church.

Report submitted with gratitude by Cate Anthony, John Jenkins, Allison Koschak, John Robrs, Will Stanley, and Susan Wilkes.