



Gathering the Flock:

Church Growth Initiatives in an Age of Ecclesial
Demographic Decline

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to discussions about church demographics in America today, the tone can quickly turn apocalyptic. A quick search for “church decline” on prominent church websites (including Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, Lutheran and Catholic outlets) brings many results that have a similar overall vibe: as the Rev. Dwight Zscheile described, “The overall picture is dire—not one of decline as much as demise within the next generation unless trends change significantly.” Though the demographic crisis has hit the mainline particularly hard, Pew reports suggest a widespread phenomenon across traditions. Lay and ordained church leaders today, acutely aware of this growing problem for their communities at both the local and national levels, have responded in a variety of ways depending on their context and the resources they have at their disposal, some involving expensive church consulting organizations and initiatives.





What if the path to church growth, or at least demographic stability, did not require massive budget expenditures but small, simple initiatives taken at the local level by the people who already care the most—the congregation?

Over the past couple of years, TryTank worked with several small (<40 average Sunday attendees) to medium-sized (<100) congregations on some such initiatives to counter church decline trends and reinvigorate their communities. Though not every initiative was successful, each offered opportunities to learn important lessons that can be applied to any number of different local contexts. Many of the initiatives were successful, and we will discuss both the successes and failures in the paper ahead. None of the initiatives required extensive labor or expense, making them readily adaptable to small, resource-strapped communities for whom outside consulting organizations are out of reach.

This paper will proceed by taking a close look at the churches and some of their initiatives, assessing the efficacy of their actions and the lessons learned in the process. Our conclusion will reflect on the general trends we observed and offer some insights for future initiatives. Though the pandemic surely influenced attendance trends at the parishes in this study, we used data that included both COVID and pre-COVID figures. The differences in each case were significant enough to merit further consideration.



CASE STUDY #1:
**HOLY FAMILY
IN LAUREL
SPRINGS, NJ**

Holy Family Episcopal Church is a small congregation in south-central New Jersey near Philadelphia. The parish was officially formed in January 2018 when the Church of the Atonement, Laurel Springs, and the Church of St. John in the Wilderness, Gibbsboro, decided to dissolve their separate congregations and form a new, joint parish. At the beginning of 2022 the average Sunday attendance was in the high teens, but today it is in the low to mid-thirties.

The kinds of initiatives that have been most effective at Holy Family involve both technological and in-person engagements. For example, the community is intentional about hosting events beyond the typical Sunday morning Eucharist celebration. They hosted a Blessing of the Animals in October, a Halloween Hospitality event that combined elements of All Saints (for example, lighting a candle for lost loved one), and an ongoing community meal ministry that offers free lunch on the first Friday of the month. In addition to these and other non-Eucharistic events, the community does more typical church gatherings—Bible study (“God Talk”) and Messy Church for young people.



The critical aspect of the church's use of these events is not necessarily in simply hosting them but in how they host them and what they do after these events. Creating a connection and contact point with newcomers and visitors is an obvious first step, and Holy Family maintains a Covid sign-in that is an important way of gathering contact information. With this contact information, the church can provide updates about ongoing events through technological means (including a text-update service that has seen very few "opt-outs" from its distribution list). Furthermore, the congregation and its leadership have a focus on "quality interactions" with newcomers and visitors: rather than bombarding new faces with the entire congregation

introducing themselves before or after the service, members seek to create a quality introduction and deeper initial contact with those people. These soft-touch approaches combined with quality engagement work well in this part of the country, a region where a small Episcopal church can be found in almost every square-mile-town.

Holy Family also makes great use of Facebook to spur further engagement. The parish's Facebook page is an unofficial landing page and the location of typical announcements from parish leadership and members. Beyond the standard categories of parish-Facebook activity (announcing future events, important life updates of members and leaders, and sermons), Holy Family also creates a large amount of original content. One of the lay leaders, Betsy Murphy, pulls quotes and ideas from the Sunday sermon to create a regular meme that the parish posts on its page. These memes are neither flashy nor complex, but they help to provide visitors to the Facebook page with a sense of the parish vibe—allowing people to experience

the community's culture prior to showing up in person. For a church whose Facebook page has 314 followers (as of this writing), these regular postings also provide further contact points with the broader community and create a greater sense of familiarity over time. Further Facebook activity includes both paid advertisements targeting their geographic area and manual parish advertising on the Facebook pages of townships within a reasonable driving distance. Though church leadership has found the paid advertisements to be ineffective (with the exception of Messy Church ads), several visitors have reported seeing the announcements parish leaders made to local township Facebook pages for specific events.





CASE STUDY #2:

TRINITY CHURCH IN FUQUAY-VARINA, NC

Trinity Church in Fuquay-Varina, NC is a small church with a bright future. Unlike many of the churches we discuss in this paper, the church is located in a rapidly growing town. In fact, Fuquay-Varina more than doubled in size from the 2010 census to 2021 (17,937 people to 36,736, respectively). The town itself is the result of a 1963 merger of two previous towns that covered much of this formerly agricultural land. Its recent population growth is largely due to the growth of the towns surrounding the Research Triangle Park area in the state's Piedmont region, a major metropolitan

area buttressed by the cities of Durham, Raleigh, and Chapel Hill. Trinity Church sits on South Main Street, an important regional thoroughfare also known as State-Route 401. In addition to a strategic location next to a busy road, Trinity's neighborhood across the street is building 8,000 new homes and the town has added two new schools in recent years.

The church community is poised for serious growth, if for no other reason than local demographic trends. But the leadership of Trinity

is not interested in waiting for new families to come waltzing in the door. Instead, they've undertaken several initiatives to improve their outreach and engagement with parishioners and newcomers alike.

One of their most successful initiatives thus far was their 2021 Blessing of the Animals service. This service took place on a Sunday afternoon, resembling something closer to a community festival than a typical Blessing of the Animals service. The church invited vendors who had anything to do with pets and animals (e.g., pet rescues, pet acupuncturist, local veterinarians, etc.) who set up shop to provide services to the animals and their owners. They also had several prize giveaways, and one major prize, to entice people to leave their contact

information. In one area they set up a photo booth so pets and their owners could take pictures together, while food trucks lined up in the parking lot. Though the parish's average attendance hovered in the upper thirties to low forties for many years, more than 200 guests attended this event. This event was a major production, but it had excellent outreach value.

Another important initiative, as with many of the parishes working with TryTank, took the form of their text-outreach program. Of all the members for whom this parish had contact information and to whom they reached out via text, only 15% opted-out of the text messages. Additionally, several members who had stopped coming or had come only infrequently started returning to the church and



claimed that the text ministry was a key factor in getting them back in the door.

So far, more than 12 families have joined Trinity over a six-month period representing a major increase for such a small parish. With a new rector in place (the Rev. Bob Henderson arrived in spring, 2022), enthusiastic lay leadership, and a booming local population, the only limiting factor in Trinity's possible growth over the next few years may be their building size. Fortunately, they've decided to address indoor size limitations by forming a Building Committee to plan and prepare for major additions to create more classroom, office, and parish gathering spaces. Trinity Church in Fuquay-Varina has a perfect combination of motivated leadership and local demographic growth—two critical components of church growth for the years ahead.



CASE STUDY #3:

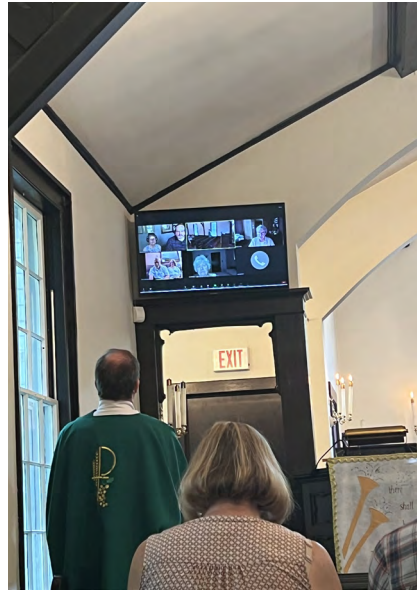
CHURCH OF THE EPIPHANY, GLENBURN, PA

The Church of the Epiphany in Glenburn, PA, is located within commuting distance of Scranton. Originally a one-room schoolhouse, the church sanctuary is over one hundred years old and the grounds feature an entrance to the popular rails-to-trails conservancy network (this specific section is called the “Trolley Trail”). Epiphany gets steady foot/cycling traffic because of its location, especially from April to November, and they are intentional about engaging this natural traffic: at the trailhead they have an enclosed bulletin board that they use to advertise church and community events, and they also hang banners there to help potential visitors make a contact point with the church community.

Epiphany has always been involved in the broader Glenburn community. They work with the local food bank (located in a nearby Methodist church) and sponsor a twice-yearly highway clean up (SR-11 runs near the church). Furthermore, they regularly host local groups at their building and allow their space to be rented out: they hosted a local pottery group whose building was undergoing



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renovations, have an ongoing relationship with a homeschooling consortium that uses the building and grounds to conduct science classes, and welcomed a local art program for children with disabilities to do a two-week program in the parish hall.

Working beyond these smaller groups, Epiphany also collaborated with the local conservancy to host a winter solstice concert that was organized with community partners such as the local library and the town. The event was on church grounds, so they opened the building to allow for visitors' access to facilities and warmth in the church. Epiphany seeks to establish a kind of familiarity with the broader Glenburn community through these kinds of engagements, helping people to feel like they know what the church is about before visiting a Sunday service. Epiphany also became a sponsor of a local public radio station, thereby getting regular advertisement over the airwaves and increasing this sense of familiarity with the station's listeners.

Beyond all this outward-facing activity, Epiphany intentionally builds up community

members who are already churchgoers. At the beginning of Covid, a parishioner set up an online church streaming operation that allows those watching online to participate in the service—they are able to do readings and offer the Prayers of the People during the liturgy. At the end of the service there is even a space dedicated to greetings and conversation between those worshipping online and the congregants physically present. As a result, Epiphany has the highest rate of live online worship viewing of any of the churches currently working with TryTank.

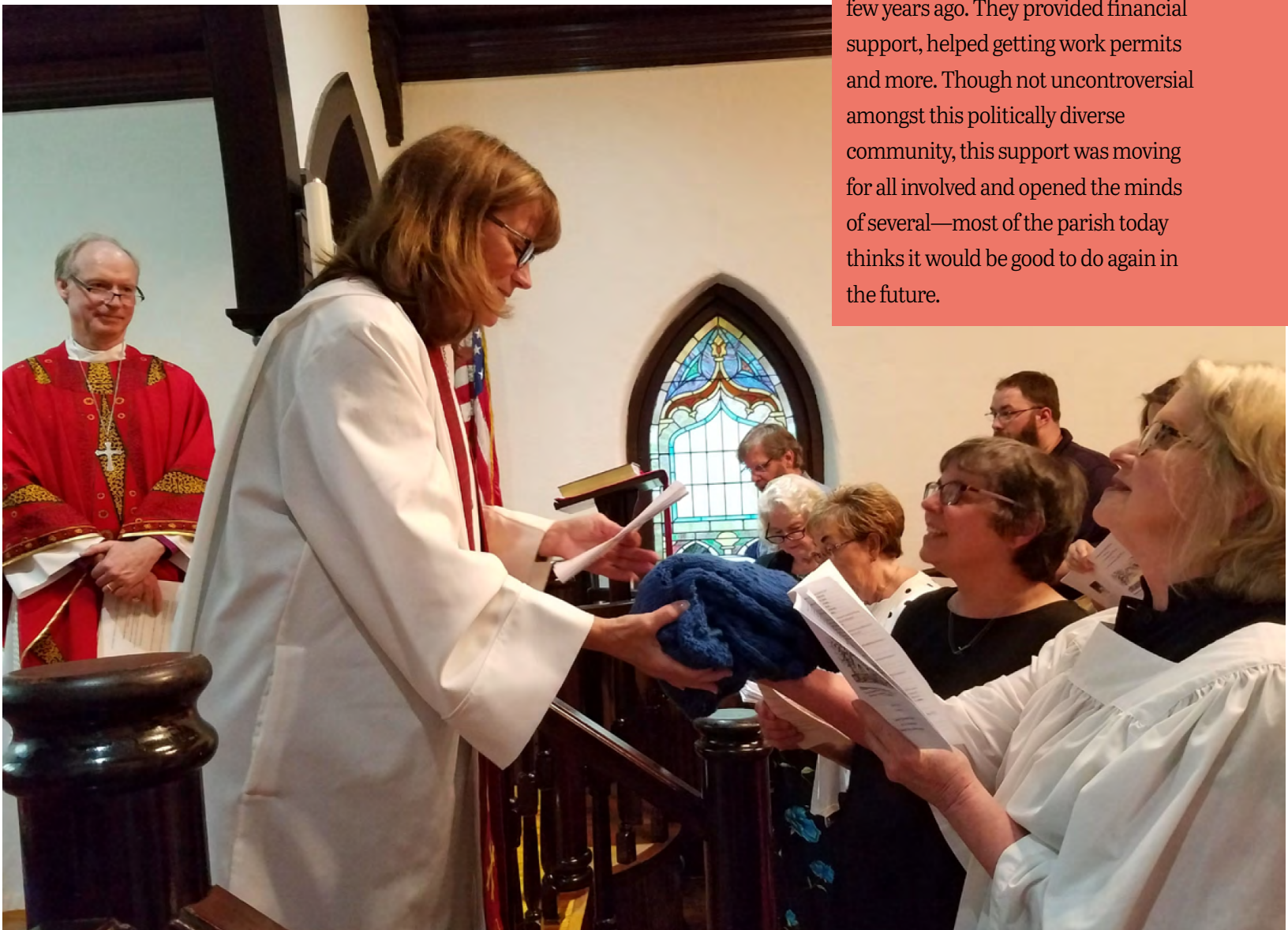
Epiphany uses technology in other ways, too, working with a text-messaging service to establish ongoing connections to members and visitors while providing spiritual content and meditations. This increased technological engagement has paired well with the church's ongoing community engagement. In fact, Epiphany's ASA has increased from averages in the low/mid 20s to high 30s and low 40s, almost doubling the size of the congregation.



CASE STUDY #4:

TRINITY, MT. AIRY, NC

Trinity Episcopal Church in Mt. Airy, NC is located just south of the Virginia border and about 35 miles northwest of Winston-Salem. The church has long been involved in various forms of community outreach, boasting a decades-long food pantry and, more recently, a medical loan closet. About three years ago, Trinity started a youth group for at-risk youth—a program that grew out of after-school-tutoring during the pandemic. Additionally, the church began supporting an asylum seeker a few years ago. They provided financial support, helped getting work permits and more. Though not uncontroversial amongst this politically diverse community, this support was moving for all involved and opened the minds of several—most of the parish today thinks it would be good to do again in the future.



One of the major initiatives that Trinity undertook as a part of their work with TryTank involved the ways in which they utilized Facebook. Using targeted advertising, and simply attempting to be more intentional about how the church was using Facebook, they began to see growth and greater engagement from the broader community. One specific area where their Facebook use generated community notice involved the local LGBT Facebook group. Trinity was intentional about being an open and affirming church, clearly advertising itself as such. As a result, they became the local go-to for newly arrived LGBT people looking for a safe church environment. In addition to their relationship with the LGBT community, Trinity has also seen increased engagement with its Facebook posts. These posts often contain advertisements about upcoming events, Episcopal church memes, and messages about members of the community doing outstanding work in the world. The main Sunday service is also livestreamed.

Beyond Facebook and their ongoing community work, Trinity has embraced more outward-facing seasonal themes. This was the second year that they did a large Lenten cross outside the church, and their Easter cross remained outside the church for some time after Easter Day. Since the sanctuary is located adjacent to an important local thoroughfare, outdoor decorative pieces like these crosses garnered a great deal of attention. Furthermore, Trinity began a tradition of “Las Posadas” this year (Las Posadas is a display of Mary and Joseph in their search for an inn that rotates from one parishioner’s front yard to another) that was popular among parishioners and commented upon by other community members.

The choir began several community choral events connected to specific seasonal celebrations. Trinity hired a new choir director/organist who has worked with local groups to perform renditions of Handel’s Messiah during Christmastime and other significant seasonal

arrangements. In large part due to this new and energetic hire, the choir grew significantly. Today, quality choral performances are now a parish norm.

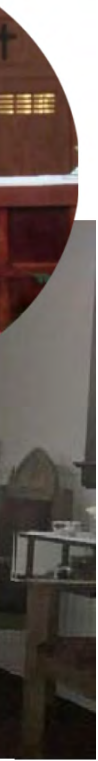
With all these shifts over the past few years, Trinity has established a reputation in Mt. Airy—the parish’s ASA grew from the 50s to the 70s today. This timing coincides with the arrival of a new rector (the Rev. Sarah Morris), but church leadership reports that many of the newcomers have joined in response to Trinity’s increased outreach and community engagement, not simply because of a more stable leadership structure (of course, Sarah’s encouraging leadership is also not to be underestimated). Trinity’s community work, online engagement and in-person festivities all have a significant impact on the parish’s reputation in the wider community. Soon, this reputation may create new problems the parish must confront—a parish hall better suited for 20-30 people may require some updating!

CASE STUDY #5 :

GOOD SHEPHERD, TOWACO, NJ

Good Shepherd in Towaco, NJ, is a much smaller parish than Trinity, Mt. Airy. The parish is the result of a merger of two small churches, neither of which was able to support a full-time clergy person. Thus, when the churches combined shortly before Covid struck, they had Morning Prayer as their main Sunday service apart from a once-a-month Eucharist celebration. The ASA for these services was around 12 for Morning Prayer and 17-18 for the Eucharist services. Today, their ASA is between 18-20 people, whether or not the service is a full Eucharistic celebration. Just under two years ago, Deacon Gail began attending to provide more continuous pastoral and congregational guidance. Her support on the church's outreach and community involvement provided the consistency and leadership necessary to achieve these higher attendance levels.





One of the most effective initiatives that Deacon Gail undertook was a consistent use of the parish's Facebook page. First, she intentionally adopted a policy of trying to have some sort of daily post on the parish page. Though simple, these updates have provided constant pings to community and parish members. As a result, the number of "Followers" has grown from the small circle of parishioners-only when Gail joined to over 100 people today. Thus, a large crowd of non-parishioners is regularly receiving updates about ongoings at the parish and ways in which the church is involved in the broader community. These updates are a priceless form of advertisement (both literally and figuratively). The postings on the Facebook page often advertise local community events (e.g., a Kiwanis Pancake

Breakfast, Lincoln Park Business club events, etc.), provide the recorded livestreams of church services, and offer information about clothing and goods available at the parish's Thrift Shop. The Thrift Shop advertisements have been particularly important as Deacon Gail began connecting with local moms' groups on Facebook and advertised infant, toddler, and children's clothing and toys.

The Thrift Shop has, in fact, been a locus of relationship and trust-building with the community. It is located a mile from the parish and is on Main Street in nearby Lincoln Park, NJ. Thanks to its central location in the neighboring township, the shop gets some foot traffic, especially during town festivals or parades. During an early October festival

in the town, Deacon Gail moved some Thrift Shop items outside and offered prayers for pets and animals to passersby (the festival was nearing St. Francis' Day). Partly due to this contact and Gail's energetic engagement with the community, one couple is now attending the church regularly.

Another way in which Good Shepherd is getting its name out and engaging community members is through sponsoring special events. Last year, the parish hosted a wine tasting event in partnership with a local liquor store that raised over \$5,000 for the church (a massive sum for a congregation so small). The event was hugely popular and had high levels of participation from parishioners and community members alike. Additionally, Good Shepherd hosted a St. Patrick's Day celebration that had over thirty people attend. These and other events continue to provide opportunities for non-parishioners to meet and engage with the parish without the pressures and structure of a normal Sunday liturgy, an opening that has had an important role in bringing in new members into the community.

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CONCLUSION



The work of these churches shows that congregational decline is not inevitable. In fact, churches seeking growth and vitality can find success through myriad initiatives, many of which are described above. Greater Facebook activity, the intentional use of town/city Facebook groups, engagement with specific demographics who may be predisposed to Episcopal social teaching (e.g., LGBTQ+ groups in southern suburbs), and even events planned with and for the local towns themselves can all be leveraged into positive engagement with the parish. These initiatives may not make every mission-sized parish into a megachurch, but they can turn the tide from decline to growth. In social and community organizations like churches, this shift can make a major difference for the future of the institution—a little bit of forward momentum goes a long way towards future development.

Another major point that we want to highlight here is that all the initiatives explored in this paper

were both low-cost and required low volunteer hours. Some of the more labor-intensive events, such as the winter solstice concert in PA, involved other community groups that offered additional volunteers and logistical support. Many of the Facebook-centered initiatives were low on labor and low cost (since the church was already employing the people creating memes and engaging local community groups). Thus, these initiatives are usable for small and medium-sized parishes in a variety of different contexts—all without massive investments in labor and outside consulting organizations. Since these investments are often out of reach for small parishes anyway, we believe that the simple initiatives outlined above offer crucial tools for many cash-strapped churches to grow their congregations.

All is not lost, and decline is not inevitable. Instead, we can work together and collaborate with one another for simple, easy, and straightforward ways of finding growth for our churches, no matter what their size.