



A Toolbox for Understanding Data Trends in The Episcopal Church

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Introduction & Overview

In January of 2020, the General Convention Office released a new data tool that allows congregations and dioceses to view ten year trends in Parochial Report data, as well as provide a demographic snapshot for the neighborhood around every parish in the United States. This tool is available online and accessible to everyone via:

<https://www.generalconvention.org/study-your-neighborhood>.

This post is the first in a series of posts that will help people to understand and explore these tools, and provide a theological framework with which to





understand the data the tool provides, as well as organizational development principles to assist congregations and dioceses in using the tool for visioning and strategic planning. The data is an incredible wealth of information. On the surface, the data tells us what has already happened, but not necessarily how it happened. The data does not predict the future, unless we proceed without intervention. So how do

we keep ourselves from thinking of the data as predicting the future? We look at the data with a new framework.

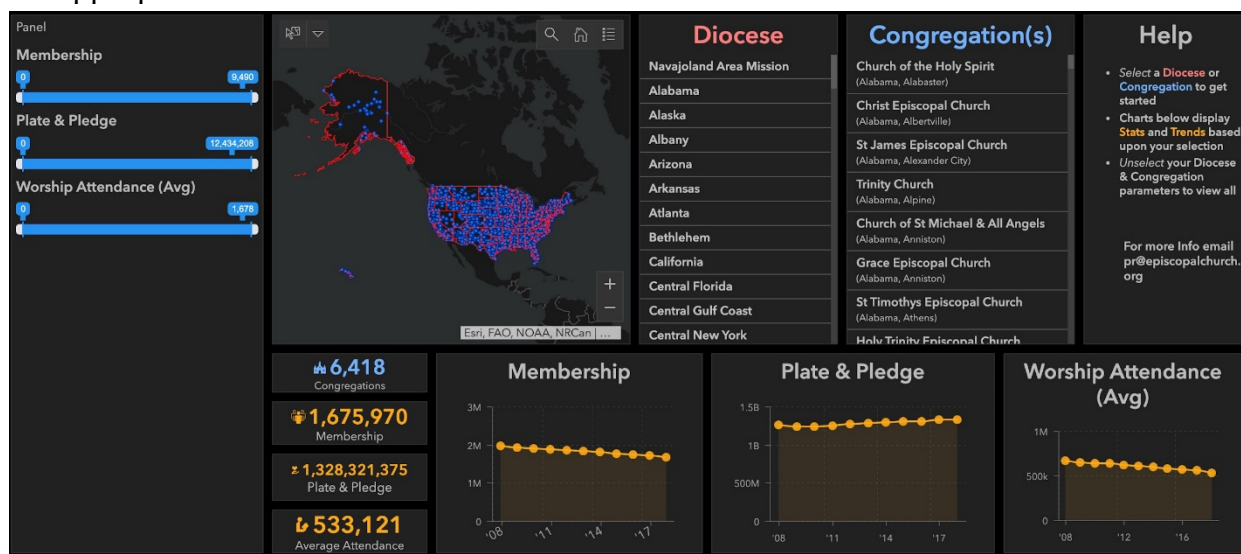
Basic How Tos

Before we delve into the theological depths of this data, some basic information on what is available in the tool and how to access it.

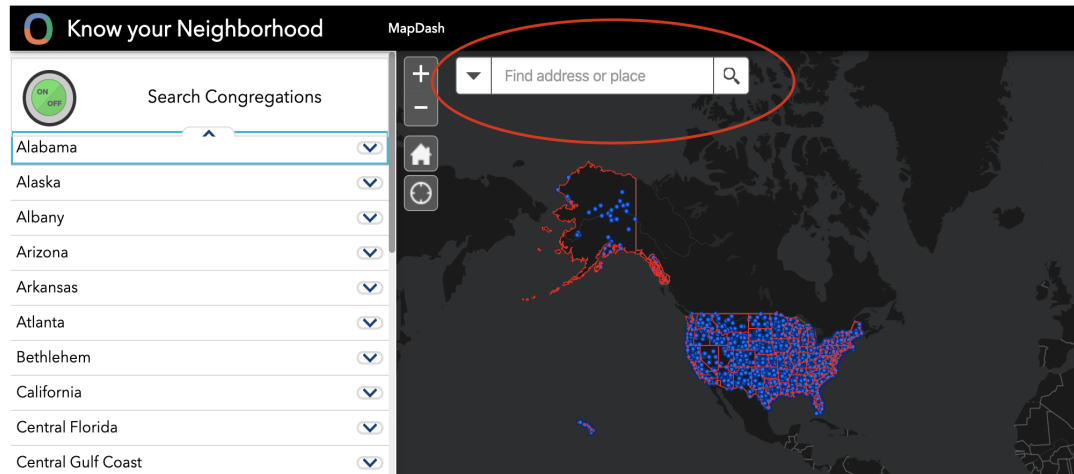
The tool has two basic tracks. The first is the Parochial Report trend data (pictured above).

To access trends for a single parish or diocese:

- You can go to: <https://episcopalchurch.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/76003689d9944d1cb82851513b0be2b3> and then click on diocese, and then the parish, if appropriate



- For just a parish, you can also type the name of town or parish into the search bar at the top of the map on: <https://www.generalconvention.org/study-your-neighborhood>, then click on the parish and then click the link to “Explore Trends”

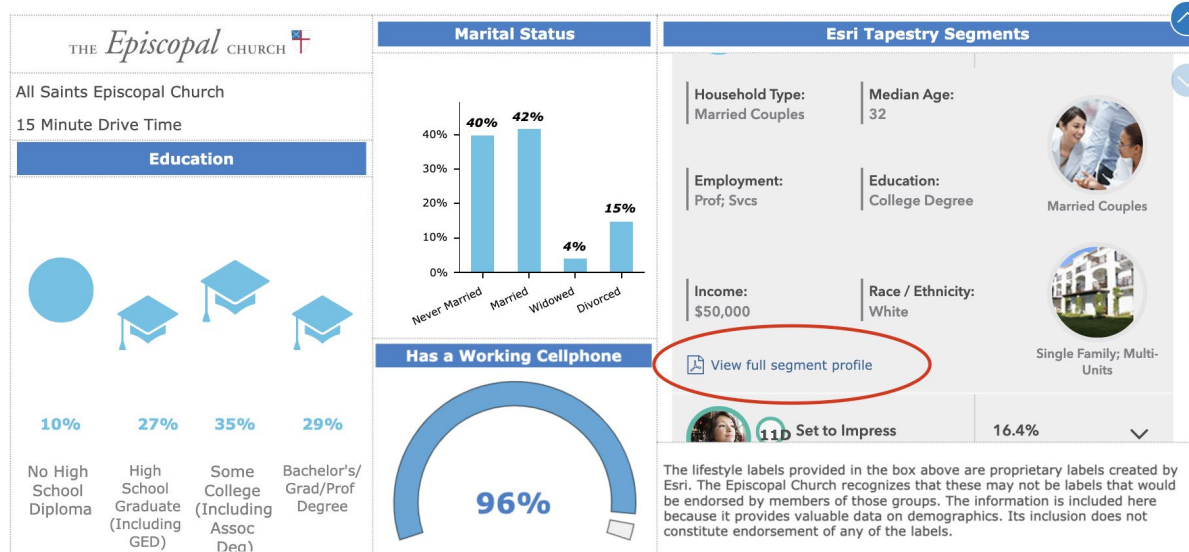


To look at combined data:

- Go to:
<https://episcopalchurch.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opstdashboard/index.html#/76003689d9944d1cb82851513b0be2b3>
 - Once there you can click on one or more dioceses, and then one or more parishes to look at what happens when their data is combined.
 - To “deselect” an entity just click it again.

The second track in the tool is to provide demographic data for the neighborhood around the parish.

- Type the name of town or parish into the search bar at the top of the map on: <https://www.generalconvention.org/study-your-neighborhood>, then click on the parish and then the click the link to “Explore Neighborhood” link
 - An interactive PDF will load. Click on any of the fields for more information. The PDF is also printable, as are the detailed segment profiles available on the second page (under Tapestry Segments)



At present the snapshot shows the information within a 15 minute drive time. We are looking into providing additional times as well. If you need a more custom demographic report for a particular radius you can create a custom profile (from .1 to 25 miles) through a great resource from our colleagues at the Church of the Nazarene.

See: <http://maps.nazarene.org/ARDADemographics/>

Unpacking Lagging Indicators

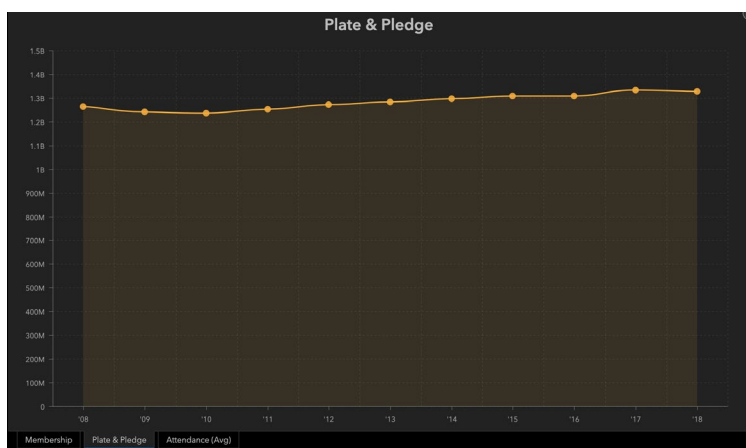
Much of the data we collect represent what we call 'lagging indicators.' A lagging indicator provides evidence or confirmation of an event that has already happened or a particular trend. For example, a company might look at profit or revenue and in the Church we might look at ASA or dollars pledged. These measures can give us some insight into the future by measuring output that has already occurred. The critical aspect of the lagging indicator often overlooked is that they are not *predictors* of the future. They can assist (not predict) in the projection of trends and provide insight, but they only report past output. Lagging indicators are best used in conjunction with leading indicators.

Developing leading indicators is something the church has been reluctant to explore. There are a number of reasons for this, including the fact that lagging indicators are simpler to identify and measure than leading indicators, and leading indicators are often more abstract in nature. Leading indicators are sometimes considered in terms of inputs. That is, the action or strategy that will lead to a particular measurable outcome. Leading indicators can give us

a better sense about what is to come and are better, though not by any means perfect, predictors of the future when accurately combined with lagging indicators.

Money and Finances

The trends that our data shows are not all downward. Notably, our finances continue to increase. Talking about money in the church is often complicated. We may, therefore, have trouble talking about our collective financial resources. Yet there is some really good news in our financial trends: we have more money. Of particular note is the fact that, while the income continues to increase, there are fewer people who are giving more money. Clearly, even before we had the financial uncertainty as a result of the pandemic, this is not a sustainable trajectory. Finding ways to increase revenue and keep expenses at a responsible level are critical factors for future sustainability.



Collectively, we actually have enough resources to engage the transformational work to which we are called. Those resources, measured in dollars, number in the billions. The figure here of \$1.3 billion reflects our combined plate and pledge and does not include the value of our real estate or our trusts and endowments. These enormous resources that can act as seed money for the church of the future. The financial gifts of our forebears have provided us with an opportunity to make a difference far greater than our numerical size. This is only possible if we think strategically, exercise stewardship of these funds, and work collaboratively.

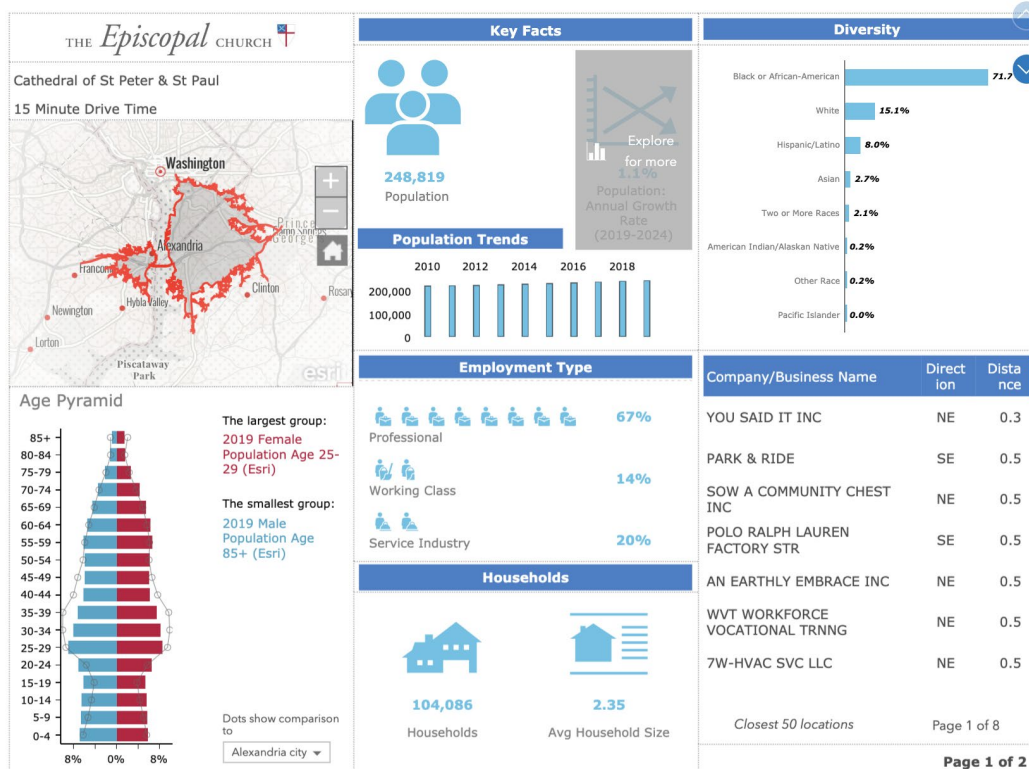
The data available here can assist congregations and dioceses in creating financial strategies that complement mission and strategic planning. These financial indicators, when combined with other demographic information, can give us a sense of past trends and prepare for a future that accounts for those patterns. For example, sampling the average age of the population of communicants in a particular diocese or analyzing giving by generational cohort at the parish level can provide opportunities for analysis that includes looking at

probable trends and considering various interventions that will create financial sustainability.

Unpacking Demographics

The second track of the data tool is one which explores the demographics of our neighborhoods. The goal is to give congregations access to statistics and information about who is around them. In some cases this information will confirm what congregational leadership already knows about the community. Sometimes the tool will also provide new information about needs or possibilities in the neighborhood. It can be an helpful exercise to see whether the people in the pews reflect the age, gender, generation, race and ethnicity, and education level of those who live nearby or whether the congregation is adequately serving the community across those variables.

Each of the blocks here can be explored more deeply: simply click on the box to gain more information. For example, you could click on the Population Annual Growth to “Explore for More.”

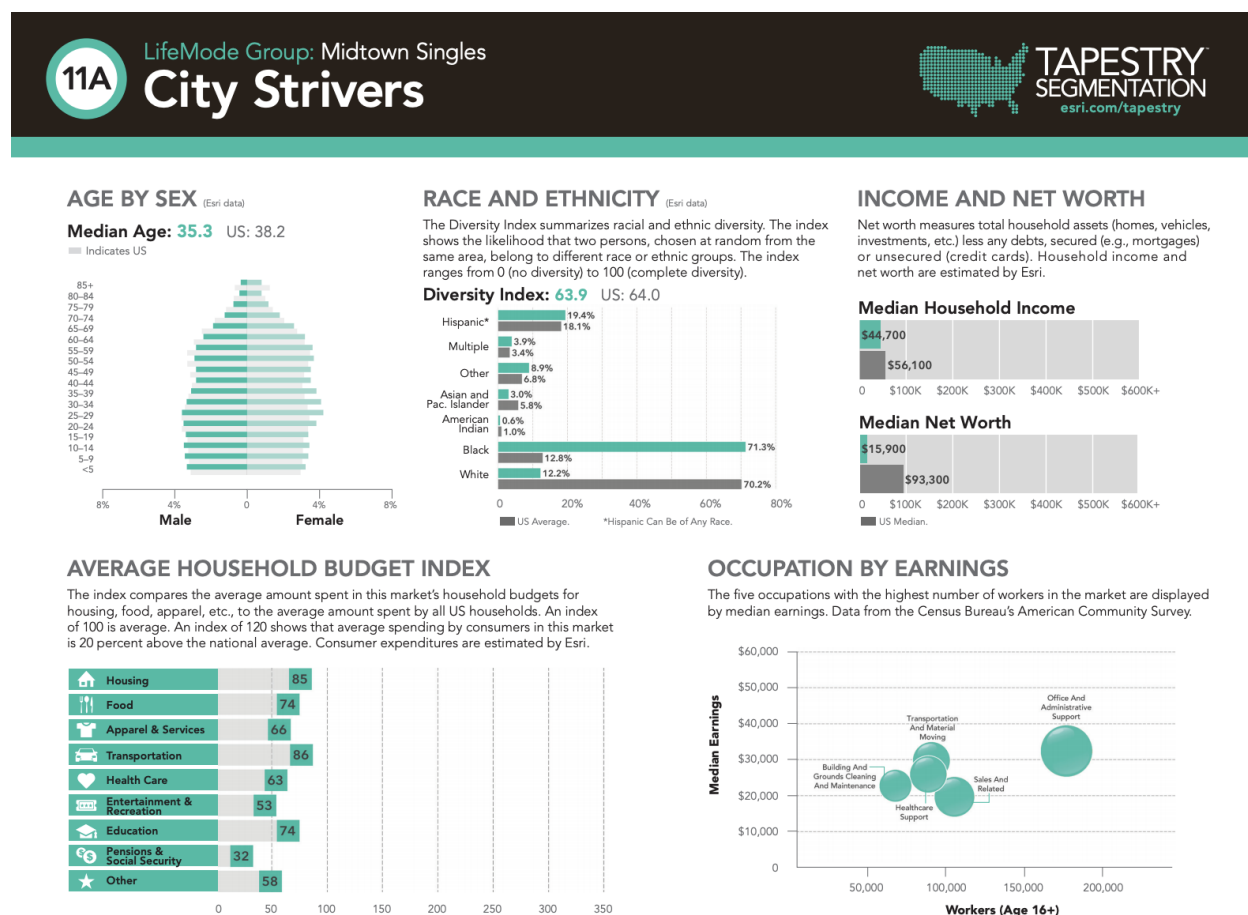


On the second page, it may be particularly helpful to note the languages spoken in the surrounding area. You might be surprised to know that in The Episcopal Church worship is conducted in 36 different languages. Worship resources in a variety of languages are available here:

<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/bcp.htm> and here:

<https://www.episcopalcommonprayer.org/existing-liturgies1.html>

As noted above, the most useful box on this pdf may be the box in the upper right hand corner of the second page that gives additional insight into the various segments of the population that are in the neighborhood of the congregation. The in-depth pdfs provide a wealth of information, including: Socioeconomic Traits, Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity, Income, Household Budgets, Occupations, Market Profile, Housing, and Geographic Density. A sample page is below.



All of this demographic information offers an invitation to congregations and communities to explore and engage their neighborhoods more fully. It also invites congregational leadership to look simultaneously at the resources of the congregation (human, financial,

and physical capital) and the needs of the neighborhood. This tool can help as congregations seek to align their resources with the needs and demographics of their neighborhoods.

Theological Framework

One of the gifts of our Anglican and Episcopal Tradition is that we do not shy away from bringing our whole selves to understanding our faith. This includes bringing the fullness of our analytical toolbox and rational brain to bear on how we understand ourselves, the world, and the God who created us. It is a fundamental principle for Episcopalians that deepening our intellectual understanding of some aspect of our faith can only serve to increase our faith. Reason and intellect are not in contrast to our faith, they enhance it.

The data we can now easily access invites us to deepen our understanding of who we are as a Church and the people of God. It is important for us to start that journey to understanding with a framework that is consistent with the core of our faith. Despair, worry and frustration are not the core principles of our faith. Hope and possibility are. Hope and possibility need to be our frames as we look at the data. It could be tempting to choose hope and possibility because they are more joyful and more fun. But we do not choose them out of some Pollyanna desire to ignore the realities in front of us. We choose them as our frames because fundamentally they are the heart of our faith. We are an Easter people. We believe that God is at work in the world bringing new life out of difficult circumstances. In fact, Good Friday and Easter tells us that God does the best work when the future seems bleak to us. We are also people of the Incarnation; we believe that God's presence is made manifest in the world in unexpected times and unexpected places. So, that means God is present and at work in the here and now. The challenges before us are significant, and they are not insurmountable.

Yes, we are declining in membership and attendance, and that is not all bad news. Think about the context of those numbers. We may wish that the societal pre-eminence of Church were still true, but the data would tell us that it is not. Wider studies of faith in America tell us that increasing numbers of people are not affiliated with any religious tradition. What are the top two reasons for that? Questioning the doctrines and the stance of a tradition on social issues (see: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/>). This means we have a tremendous opportunity as The Episcopal Church. We are a place where your intellectual curiosity and your questions are welcome. We have core beliefs and doctrines (the Creeds, our Baptismal Covenant, our whole Book of Common Prayer, our Constitution and Canons, for instance)? And we welcome engagement with all of those. We welcome dialogue and questions. We want to

help people understand. Of course, at the end of that dialogue some people may decide we are not the Church for them. It is likely that many more would stay because they felt heard, honored, and respected, because they discovered the richness and breadth of who we are and what we believe.

Additionally, our stance on social issues are likely more in line with the values of many of the “nones” than they or we might think. As our [Presiding Bishop](#) has so aptly summed up for us, “If it’s not about love, it’s not about God.” That is a core value for us and so many in our neighborhoods. Additionally, we are not a tradition that mandates particular viewpoints for those in the pew. We do not hesitate from speaking on social issues. See the work of our [Office of Government Relations](#), for instance. Or type any hot button social issue into the digital archives of the [Acts of General Convention](#). Our commitments to racial reconciliation, to equality, to addressing poverty and the myriad of factors that prevent people from realizing the fullness of life abundant that God desires for them, are evident. These commitments do not necessarily make headline news. Yet they are there, and hopefully they can inspire us to share the Good News of how The Episcopal Church is living out its call to be followers of Jesus.

Visioning Possibilities with Data

Casting a compelling and winsome vision for the transformation of the world around us is the work of God’s people. Leadership across the church engage the practices of prayer, discernment, and conversation to unearth vision that aligns with their specific contexts. Our church is one that values the imagination, and ideating is both generative and creative.

The weakness in our approach is that we are often so taken with our ideas and our intuition about how those ideas might work that we often fail to consult the data. The fact is that intuition is insufficient, by itself, to develop sound strategy. A visioning process that lacks hard data in prediction and evaluation is simply wishful thinking.

Parochial report data, organized the way it is in this tool and used alongside other relevant contextual data, can help us test ideas and provide good insight. For example, this tool gives congregations and dioceses the ability to combine data in ways that allow accurate contrast and comparison. We can more easily identify or develop leading indicators when we can examine the data of the whole church, a region, a diocese, or congregations in part or in the aggregate.

Conversation Toolbox

All this information invites us to rethink what we see. Yes, it invites us to let go and lay down some old ways of thinking. It also invites us to dream of new possibilities. These graphs tell us a story of where we are and how we got here. They do not have to tell us the story of where we are going; downward trends can be transformed into upward trends with careful analysis and data-driven interventions.

We stand at a remarkable turning point in the history of our Church. We have tremendous resources. We have willing and committed people. We have something for which the world is hungry. We have the kind of deep, connected, meaning-making community that people crave. How do we look ahead with hope? How do we live out the principles of our faith and trust in the possibility of a future we cannot yet see? How do we want to use the remarkable resources we have to be God's people in the world?

These numbers and the stories of our neighborhoods invite us to explore and dream. If we are willing to trust in God and trust in the myriad of resources (people and finances) that we have been given, then this data can prompt creative thinking and ambitious goals for deepening relationships with God and with each other. The data can help us target our efforts more strategically and allow us to be a more effective force for transformation in our hurting world.

See next page for a sheet of discussion questions.

Discussion Questions:

How do the data trends from our Parochial Report fit with our own experience? [Note: if you find errors in your data, please email pr@epischoapchurch.org]

What are the stories that the data tells? Are there things that surprise us in our graphs? What stories do the leadership need to learn now that they have seen the data?

What future possibilities can we imagine that do not just continue a declining trend?

What surprises, excites or scares us about the demographics of our neighborhood?

How does the congregation reflect the demographics of the neighborhood?

What new relationships and opportunities might be possible given what we now know about the demographics of the neighborhood?

How do we want to join more fully with what God is up to in our neighborhood?

How do you as an individual and the broader congregational community feel inspired to share the Good News with your neighborhood given what you have learned from this data?