

Community Portfolio Information

Church Name St. John's

City Williamstown, Mass.

Address 35 Park Street

Phone (413) 458-8144

Contact Information: Jim Kolesar

Address 22 Thomas Street

(City, State) Williamstown, MA 01267

Phone (413) 281-0477

Average Sunday Attendance 115

Worship Service Numbers: Weekend: 115 Plus small monthly weekday vesper service

Previous incumbents: The Rev. Peter T. Elvin 1986 2016

The Rev. Bryant Whitman Dennison 1976 1985

The Rev. Douglas G. Burgoyne 1964 1976

Plus interim priests

Church School

Children Students 18 **Leaders** 4

Teens Students 3 **Leaders** 4

Adults: Occasional study groups, foundations course, and preparation for baptism and confirmation

Note: The church school is reintroducing Godly Play.

Describe a moment in your worshipping community's recent ministry that you recognize as one of success and fulfillment.

One evening this spring our church choir joined with a string orchestra of students and adults led by our special events coordinator to present Vivaldi's *Gloria*.

While it stormed outside, inside all was going well, until, as the soprano soloist's first delicate phrase was spinning out, we heard a loud CRACK! and the entire town went dark. A few seconds passed as we registered what had happened, and at the moment when it would have made sense for the conductor to regretfully postpone the concert, from out of the shadows his voice came, saying, "I'm sure we can figure something out." Concertgoers began bringing out cell phones with flashlights to illuminate music for the players and singers. People lit candles. The organist walked from the now unpowered organ to the piano where, for the rest of the piece, a young boy held two phones high, shining their lights on the piano music.

And so we played on, performing the majority of the piece in the no-longer dark.

The power of the “shared magic” was noted by a non-parishioner as the “community made light and forged ahead.” And kids were heard telling their friends how exciting it was to be part of helping the music happen.

Describe your liturgical style and practice for all types of worship in your community.

We welcome all people to their place at God’s table. In our liturgy, we strive for creativity, depth, beauty, and excellence through careful planning. We value preaching, silence, and complexity. A current priority is to include children more fully.

The 8 a.m. Sunday service, without music, uses traditional Rite 1 *BCP* Eucharistic Prayers with more contemporary elements for the Liturgy of the Word. The 10 a.m. service draws elements from *BCP* Rite 2, *Enriching our Worship*, Iona, and New Zealand liturgies.

Our music, drawn from many sources, is led by our choir director, an associate of the American Guild of Organists, and supported by organ, piano, an uncommonly strong all-volunteer choir, strong congregational singing, and occasional instrumentalists from the congregation and community.

Additional regular services include Rite 2 mid-week Eucharist, monthly Vespers Service, a Sunday evening meal and worship (“The Feast”) run by the college chaplaincy, and monthly lay-led Evening Prayer at a nursing home.

How do you practice incorporating others in ministry?

This is an area in which we feel we could do better.

Our buildings are open for drop-in prayer and for regular use by outside groups, and many local residents attend events here.

But we lack an organized welcome of new, or potential, parishioners. Our previous rector followed up with visitors in an escalating series of contacts, but our ushers aren’t trained to greet visitors. In fact none of us has been charged with greeting visitors or escorting them to coffee hour. And there’s nothing tucked in the pew rack on which visitors can register their interest. Some parishioners do reach out on their own, and we’ve recently formed a group to organize these efforts.

Each year several Williams students become deeply engaged with St. John’s. That’s several out of 2,000. We hold a beginning-of-academic-year cookout for students and parishioners, which has all the social grace of a middle school dance. We’re exaggerating. A little.

In our many conversations leading up to this profile, we heard both how friendly and open our congregation is on Sunday (our peace passing is notably high-energy) and yet how difficult it can feel for some visitors to break into that sense of family.

As a worshipping community, how do you care for your spiritual, emotional and physical wellbeing?

Our Sunday mornings are refreshing experiences of drawing closer to God and to each other. There’s a comforting sense of family. The prayers of the people include an active list of those, inside and outside the parish, in need of prayer. Hands-on prayer for healing is available during communion.

A significant number of us are involved with some kind of small group—Bible study, reading, knitting. The choir provides many of the benefits of a small group. So does the altar guild.

Participation in lay ministry and outreach nourishes many of us.

We occasionally gather as a group just to enjoy each other's company.

And we've recently formed a group to organize more parishioner-to-parishioner support.

For clergy, we've long been committed to a regular pattern of sabbaticals, and we put aside money each year to support it.

Our current wardens are particularly attentive to the need for staff and lay leaders to stay fresh by protecting personal time and maintaining healthy spiritual habits.

How do you engage in pastoral care for those beyond your worshipping community?

Lay Eucharistic ministers serve individual shut-ins and nursing home residents, and parishioners hold Evening Prayer Services at nursing homes for all comers.

We maintain a small food pantry and a garden that produces vegetables for distribution.

We've recently launched a cancer support group and a program to gather, fill, and bless backpacks for children at an elementary school with a high poverty rate in neighboring North Adams.

For many years we annually sent up to a dozen parishioners, many of them youth, on medical mission trips to Latin America, where they provided (or supported those who provided) surgery, examinations, and medical education. Most recently this has been a single parishioner.

Many parishioners are deeply engaged with caring ministries through local regional, and national organizations.

We provide meeting spaces for local groups (including Alcoholics Anonymous and an Early Intervention playgroup) and for workshops on current issues.

We recently formed a committee to consider ways to better organize our outreach.

And we often hear from non-parishioners how spending time alone in our unlocked sanctuary during a time of stress has been an occasion of deep blessing.

Describe your worshipping community's involvement in either the wider Church or geographical community.

In the church, we annually pay our full diocesan assessment, participate regularly in Diocesan Convention, and attend other diocesan programs. More of this would probably occur if the cathedral weren't an hour and forty-five minutes away.

Our retired rector was for many years deeply engaged with diocesan activities and served several times as a delegate to General Convention.

Local clergy sometimes collaborate, as when they created a system to address the needs of transients.

For many years we've shared a Good Friday service with the local Methodist church, and in recent years we've shared a Holy Week service with All Saints Episcopal Church in North Adams.

We hold occasional events with the nearby First Congregational Church, and on the most recent Williams Commencement Sunday, held a joint service on a brilliant morning at the reflecting pool of The Clark Art Institute.

In the community, many parishioners are deeply engaged with caring ministries (local and further afield).

And we were founding members of Berkshire Interfaith Organizing—a group of 17 congregations that uses the model of community organizing to address issues of social justice throughout the county.

Tell about a ministry that your worshipping community has initiated in the past 5 years. Who can be contacted about this project?

With the blessing of our Vestry and interim priest, a parishioner launched this spring a cancer support group, starting with several parishioners he knew were living with, or had lived with, cancer.

Still in its formative stage, the group consists of five or so parishioners who meet twice a month to hear how each of them is doing, share resources, and occasionally listen to an invited speaker. The group's growing publicity makes clear that it's open to anyone who's living with (or has lived with) cancer, caretakers, and others interested in learning more about the disease and providing support.

Contact: John Ladd, (413) 664-9966

Our choir director was recently awarded a diocesan grant to support the formation of a chorister program open to all children in the area in grades 3-7. The program aims to provide high-quality music education through choral singing at no cost to families, delivered through RSCM's *Voice for Life* materials. The grant includes a stipend for a Williams student assistant.

Staff and volunteers are working to arrange transportation from local schools. The children will rehearse weekly and sing once a month in services.

Contact: Bob Hansler, rhansler@gmail.com

How are you preparing yourself for the Church of the future?

If the church of the future will be less clergy-centered, operate more outside its walls, and more effectively use new media, then:

We've developed over many years a parish culture of lay leadership. The group Holy Cow! interpreted our responses to its Congregational Assessment Tool as those of a parish focused on ministry, rather than on clergy or power. This dynamic seems one reason why our current transition has so far gone so smoothly.

We've taken beginning steps outside our walls, including occasional joint ventures, and even worship services, with nearby churches (Episcopal, Congregational, and Methodist). For many years we've provided a once-a-month supplement to the weekday provision of Meals on Wheels, and in recent years, we helped found the Berkshire Interfaith Organizing group mentioned earlier.

Though many parishioners are involved in ministries outside St. John's, we believe that growing the number of parish-organized ministries could help meet pressing needs, glorify God, and make more visible our faith in action.

Regarding new technology, we plan to experiment soon with a new model for harnessing our web site and social media to advance the parish's work.

What is your practice of stewardship and how does it shape the life of your worshipping community?

Our program focuses on sharing our individual and collective time, talent, and financial means.

Each year the parish gives an amount equal to 10% of pledged income to more than 40 organizations near and far.

We also have a variety of ongoing and ad hoc ways for parishioners to give in response to disaster, and we're a founding member of Berkshire Interfaith Organizing, as mentioned earlier.

We provide physical assistance and advocacy for those in need. When a storm wiped out a local mobile home park, parishioners were active in rescue, relocation, and the development of new housing. In coordination with other churches, we supplement one Sunday a month the weekday provision of Meals on Wheels. We've also joined in medical mission trips to Latin America.

By recent count, 145 parishioners regularly share their gifts with St. John's, providing leadership, music, professional expertise, cooking skills, and artistic talents.

We keep our sanctuary open for drop-in prayer and make our meeting rooms regularly available to several groups at no cost (though some do make a donation).

Despite this list, there's reason to believe that there's capacity for our stewardship to grow.

What is your worshipping community's experience of conflict? And how have you addressed it?

It's been many years since we've experienced any serious conflict. Honest. What does that say about us? Is it all good?

What is your experience leading/addressing change in the church? When has it gone well? When has it gone poorly? And what did you learn?

Our experience of this clergy transition seems worth exploring.

With few exceptions, we headed into it with less trepidation than might be expected after such a long, and admired, rectorship, and so far things have progressed smoothly. We experienced wonderful goodbyes with Peter and Diana, we're well served by our interim, attendance remains steady, and pledges have actually risen. We've even been experimenting with changes in worship, including new prominence for children.

The factors that have helped make this so seem to include:

Already being a stable parish (membership, governance, finances)

Being well and ably staffed

Confidence in the breadth and depth of our lay leadership

Wrapping the process in prayer (for example our Profile and Search Teams are served by a lay chaplain)

Wise and effective counsel from diocesan transition officer Rich Simpson

Being inclusive in our planning and in communicating to parishioners about the process.

If you were to identify the gifts/skills you need in leadership as you move into the future, which words would you use to best describe these?

Are you:

Interested in serving in a New England college town?

Ready to share a deep and visible Christian faith?

Organized and able to work collaboratively, with good humor and open communication?

Ready to engage with community and church leaders of various faiths and none?

Eager to inspire and equip us, by word and example, for new and expanded ministry?

We are:

An active, financially stable parish with strong lay leadership.

Fresh from 30 years of uncommonly strong and devoted service from our retired rector.

Open to people wherever they are on their spiritual and life journey.

Aware of our shortcomings (we think).

Eager to learn (interest in a recent Qur'an study group was so great it had to be split in two)

Deeply engaged with the arts, especially music.

Actively involved in outreach in our community, country, and world.

Together we can:

Learn, grow, and minister.

Engage people of all types and ages—children, youth, students, adults, and seniors.

Provide pastoral care to individuals in the parish and beyond.

Grow in faith and fellowship.

Advance our mission to know Christ and make Christ known.

And move confidently into the future God beckons us to.

Websites: www.saintjohnswilliamstown.org, [www.facebook.com/St-Johns-Episcopal-Church](https://www.facebook.com/St-Johns-Episcopal-Church-Williamstown-1694714427438765)

[Williamstown-1694714427438765](https://www.facebook.com/St-Johns-Episcopal-Church-Williamstown-1694714427438765)

Languages significantly represented in parish: English

Wardens: Claudia Ellet, claudiaellet@msn.com; Margot Sanger, margotsanger@roadrunner.com

Previous Warden: Polly MacPherson, pollymacpherson@yahoo.com

Search Chair: Laurie Glover, laglov@gmail.com