

Developing Digital Capacity for the Analog Church *or: How Episcopalians Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Interwebs*

This project seeks to expand a pandemic-prompted trajectory of online ministry, specifically for our *digital striving* traditional, sacramental, liturgical church—[Christ Church Denver](#)—as we adapt and innovate alongside other likeminded churches.

The “narthex” is an in-between space in traditional parish architecture, a place of encounter between worship and the world. Trading on this architectural image, this proposed program is for the median Mainline: churches of 75-300 that are not (and do not intend to become) an “online church,” but remain rooted, local, “analog” parishes acclimating to societal shifts with prudent virtual engagement.

Beginning with a pilot group of six closely affiliated congregations, then broadening out to a larger peer-mentoring network (for a total of 31 churches), our envisioned endeavor includes four key components:

- 1) **Digital Ministry Assessment + Strategic Planning:** a thorough assessment of current offerings, assets, and growth opportunities for our parish and a pilot cohort,
- 2) **Capital Subgrants + Learning Cohorts:** broadening initial technology grants and learnings to an additional 25 parishes for a larger peer-mentoring network,
- 3) **Curating + Creating Online Content:** developing new web/social-media optimized videos to reach the rising generation of “nones” and offer catechesis/whole-life discipleship to existing believers,
- 4) **Training + Capacity Building:** more widely disseminate resources and best practices, freely available online through various forums to multiply impact.

Our end goal is threefold:

- **virtual community-engaging content** (aimed especially at the “nones” where they are—i.e., online), providing resources to explore the life questions they are asking,
- **digital whole-life discipleship resources** reacquainting existing believers with ancient faith practices, accessible online and relevant to their Monday-through-Saturday lives and mission fields,
- **a learning cohort of likeminded Mainline churches** committed to peer-mentoring and resource sharing, appropriate to our theological/ecclesiological sensibilities, size, resources, and ends.



CHRIST CHURCH DENVER
BE WITH, BECOME LIKE, LIVE LIKE JESUS

Thriving Congregations Initiative

Budget Summary

January 1, 2024 - December 31, 2028

	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	Total
INCOME						
Lilly Endowment Grant	\$308,058	\$167,098	\$471,658	\$105,213	\$71,268	\$1,123,296
TOTAL INCOME	\$308,058	\$167,098	\$471,658	\$105,213	\$71,268	\$1,123,296
EXPENSES						
Personnel	\$131,825	\$131,825	\$131,825	\$98,869	\$65,913	\$560,256
Subgrants	90,000		300,000			390,000
Consultants	72,000	30,000	32,500			134,500
Supplies	800	800	800	800	800	4,000
Equipment	1,299					1,299
Travel	7,400					7,400
Hospitality	480	480	2,480	2,480	2,480	8,400
Indirect Costs	4,254	3,993	4,053	3,064	2,076	17,441
GRAND TOTAL	\$308,058	\$167,098	\$471,658	\$105,213	\$71,268	\$1,123,296

The Rev'd Joseph Wolyniak
PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Mr. Brady TenBarge
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS



Developing Digital Capacity for the Analog Church or: How Episcopalians Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Interwebs

Purpose Statement




The name for this project is “The Narthex,” a Greek architectural term referring to a space in traditional churches between the sanctuary (the place of worship) and the world. Our goal is to help our own and other traditional Mainline Protestant churches embrace digital ministry to lower barriers of encounter, access, and participation: to better connect with our own membership, but especially the rising “[nones, dones, and spiritual but not religious](#)” (hereafter abbreviated as simply “nones”).

While there are many *online churches* ([Life Church](#), [Highlands](#), [North Point](#), [Saddleback](#), etc.), we want to develop *prudent practices for the median Mainline*: churches of 75-300 that are not—and do not intend to become—an “online church,” but remain local, rooted, “analog” parishes adapting to societal shifts with digital engagement.

There are two drivers for this project at this time: first and foremost, the increasing “nones” (especially among younger generations) who would never darken the doorstep of a church but unhesitatingly look to cyberspace for answers to life’s questions; and, second, the increased openness to (even demand for) more accessible online content among Mainline members in the post-pandemic church.

We want to continue the journey our own parish ([Christ Church Denver](#)) has been on—as a *digital striving* traditional, sacramental, liturgical church—alongside more reluctant, resistant, *digital skeptic* Mainline churches (whose leadership and membership is suddenly more open to the opportunity and urgency of online ministry).

Our end goal is threefold:

- 1)  **virtual community-engaging content** (aimed especially at the “nones” where they are—i.e., online), providing resources to explore the life questions they are asking:
→ *What is the life/ spiritual journey of a person and how does a parish’s digital strategy intentionally intersect?*
- 2)  **digital whole-life discipleship resources** reacquainting existing believers with ancient faith practices, accessible online and relevant to their Monday-through-Saturday lives and mission fields:
→ *How do we more effectively equip all baptized believers to live out their “vocation and ministry” where they are, amid changing patterns of participation?*
- 3)  **a learning cohort of likeminded Mainline churches** committed to peer-mentoring and resource sharing, appropriate to our theological/ ecclesiological sensibilities, size, resources, and ends:
→ *How do we do this *together*, as churches more theologically and generationally inclined toward analog approaches, in an increasingly Internet-operative world?*

Background + Rationale

› **Changing Context of Congregational Life and Ministry**

The challenges we face today as a church are myriad. Even before the pandemic, the [decline of Christianity](#) in America was well aired. Our own Episcopal News Service noted that [current trends portend a “dire” future](#), as Dwight Zscheile (vice president of innovation, Luther Seminary) put it: “the trajectory is not one of *decline* but *demise* within the next generation ... at this rate, there will be no one in worship by 2050 in the entire denomination.”

In the throes of covid, a frontpage article in *The Denver Post* (featuring a top-fold picture of our parish’s pandemic-pivot “drive-thru communion”) enumerated the many [challenges that religious bodies face in Colorado](#). Citing a [2017 Gallup poll](#), the author noted that—at 30%—Colorado has *the seventh highest percentage of “nones” in the US*, notably ahead of California and within the error margin of leading regions for disaffiliation (Hawaii and Alaska: 33%, New England: 32%).

Compounding matters for Episcopalians: the growing ranks of the “nones” are disproportionately *younger*: according to [Pew](#), 32% of those aged 18-29 vs. 9% of 65+. Millennials and Gen Z have largely rejected their parents’ and grandparents’ religiosity. And as one of the oldest denominations in the US, with [a modal age of 69](#), we are the church that they’ve left behind.

At the same time, Denver is rapidly changing. One of the fastest growing municipalities in the country (>20% population surge since 2010), the median age of our city is 33—with a remarkable 68% aged 44 or younger. In short, Denver is a younger city with a *greater* and *growing* proportion of “nones.”

Yet, as Morgan Shipley (Foglio Endowed Chair of Spirituality, Michigan State University) notes: “Shifts from traditional religious membership [don’t simply mean Americans are rejecting religion](#). Rather, they are exploring *an ever-evolving spectrum of spirituality*.” Including, he notes, Denver’s infamous [International Church of Cannabis](#), housed in a shuttered Lutheran church just 4 miles to our northeast.

Given this younger generation of digital natives spends [7.5+ hours a day online](#) (including 2.25 hours on social media), it should come as no surprise that they are seeking the transcendent *virtually*. Shipley adds: “For those disillusioned with traditional religion, *digital technologies*, apps, and online options offer new avenues to engage with *spiritual practice*.” Younger generations go to Google to find God. And YouTube, the world’s second largest search engine (alongside Instagram, TikTok, etc.).

Meanwhile, the Episcopal Church—a sacramental and liturgical church, moored to ancient precepts and traditions, and long benefiting from establishment largess—has largely (and sometimes smugly) ignored or outright denied the seismic spiritual shift afoot. We do *incarnation*, not *internet*. But, if current trends are any indication, a tsunami of post-Christian secularity and religionless spirituality is upon us. Change is nigh, whether or not we embrace it.

Even among the faithful, we are noticing documented national trends in the parish: including [decreasing regular attendance and religious practice](#). As Pew’s [Religious Landscape Study](#) noted: only 33% of Mainline Protestants attend worship/midweek offerings “at least once a week,” 43% “one/twice a month or a few times a year,” 24% “seldom or never.”

Notably, that study is now a decade old (2007-2014) and *pre-pandemic*. More recent studies have suggested that [COVID-19 lockdowns “resulted in an overall depression of religious participation”](#): with a *new* third of churchgoing Americans abruptly ceasing attendance, once again especially among young adults 18-29 (from a 24% to now 43% “never” attending).

Concomitantly (as if all of this isn’t enough), we are also witnessing a precipitous decline in basic Christian comprehension and practice. A recent Barna study noted that a full [51% of churchgoing Christians have not heard of the Great Commission](#): “go and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19).

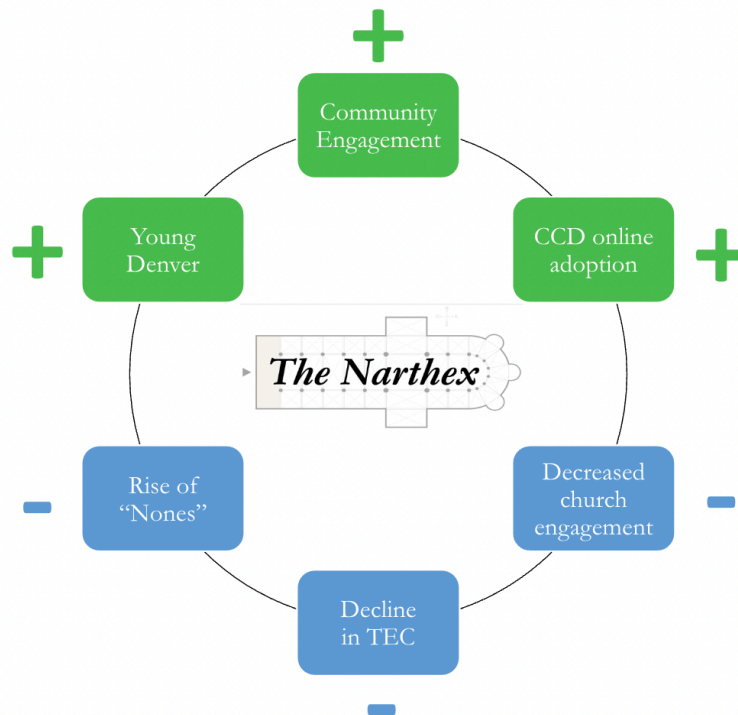
Proposal Narrative

Meanwhile, Pew found that [only half of Mainline Protestants pray daily](#) (53%, with 15% seldom/never), a mere 30% read Scripture devotionally outside of Sunday services, and a scant 19% participate weekly in formation (e.g., prayer groups, religious education, etc.).

Perhaps this makes sense if only [57% of Episcopalians are “absolutely certain” about the existence of God](#).

Despite all these challenges, if we are to not just *survive* but *thrive*, we will need to adapt with what our friends at Duke Divinity School call “[traditioned innovation](#).” That is precisely what we are endeavoring to do: pivot our offerings (worship and discipleship) to online/hybrid formats, reach beyond our walls to engage both spiritual seekers and parishioners in their everyday contexts, and lower barriers of exploration and engagement.

This is where “The Narthex” is positioned, as the intersection of the sacred and secular, squarely facing challenges in our changing context with a hopeful innovation.



We are not endeavoring to become an *online* church; we are (and by God’s grace will remain) an *analog* church: a rooted, local, neighborhood parish committed to seeing God’s redeeming reign *in Denver* as it is in heaven. Amid the pandemic, many declared the end of bricks and mortar—exchanging hidebound buildings for the limitless potential of virtual engagement. Our theological and ecclesiological commitments preclude such pronouncements, not to mention our worries over “digital gnosticism” (c.f., Slavoj Žižek’s *On Belief: “Against the Digital Heresy”*) and the individualist/consumeristic trappings of “virtual reality church” (as [parodied](#) by comedian John Crist).

We doggedly believe that the local, physical church is God’s intended beachhead for the inbreaking kingdom—indeed, the primary vehicle for both Christian community and a flourishing city writ large (c.f., Augustine’s *City of God*). So, this project is, by design, *local* and *parochial* in focus. Nevertheless, in our increasingly networked world, we remain attendant to the Spirit broadening our horizons; and we are quite certain that, no matter our outcomes, there will be universalizable learnings that we are ready, willing, and eager to share.

› Characteristics of Thriving Congregations

There is a cynical joke among younger clerics: in the Episcopal Church, we don’t *plant* churches, we *close* them. Younger clergy know that our congregations, as well as the landscape of Christianity generally, will look quite different in the decades ahead.

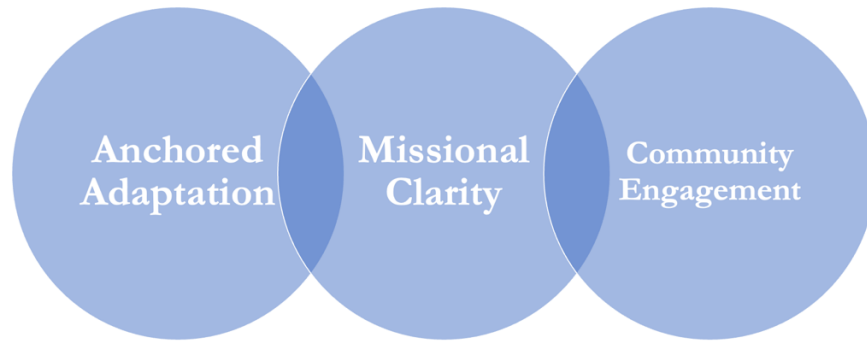
Proposal Narrative

Thom Rainer's *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* (2014) offers a postmortem on churches (including his own) that declined unto demise, namely: getting trapped in a "good-ol'-golden-age," ceasing (even refusing) to look like the surrounding community, falling into an obsessive-inward-focus on budgets and facilities, letting the Great Commission become the Great Omission, and becoming preference-driven instead of purpose-driven.

It could be said that a thriving church is the converse: rooted in the past but attendant to the present and future, continually assessing and addressing the community around it, sensibly managing budgets and facilities while nurturing an outward focus, keeping the main things the main things (including the Great Commandment and the Great Commission), and having a clear, specific, Jesus-centered, others-focused purpose.

Still, thriving may not be readily quantifiable. As Stanley Hauerwas quips: "We're not called to be *effective*, but *faithful*." That may be unnecessarily dichotomous (failure and futility are not necessarily preferable), but the measure is not always *more*: more attending, more budget, more notoriety. In a culture obsessed with the idea that bigger is better, the church has a role to play in instead insisting that *more* is not always best.

No matter the church size or context, we think there are three primary characteristics of thriving congregations:



→ Anchored Adaptation

Current trends evince an urgent need for ecclesial adaptation. However, it is equally important for churches to not anxiously and uncritically hitch themselves to the latest fads—becoming “a reed swayed by the wind” (Matthew 11:17). Tradition, while it can hamper, also helps. It keeps us from making hasty, rash, and imprudent alterations, trussed to ancient wisdom. We no doubt need adaption, but it must be anchored.

The pandemic forced churches the world over to change their ministry models overnight, in ways that were both hard and helpful. While we were deprived much of what we hold dear, including communion and community, we were forced into a ministerial Sabbath: letting most ministries lay fallow, reexamining our ministerial approach. Now post-pandemic, the temptation is reversion to ministry models employed before—ignoring fundamental questions about our principles and practices. We pivoted hurriedly, but now many are just as hurriedly pivoting back.

Our parish is trying to resist reversion, retaining lessons learned by utilizing new technologies to connect with one another and neighbors well beyond our walls. We want to continue pushing into a faithful, prudent use of digital technologies to creatively adapt and innovate our offerings, especially through fully virtual and hybrid formats. And to do so *within* the prudent confines of our canons, prayer book, liturgical traditions, and ecclesiological sensibilities. In short, as Jesus suggested: “new treasures as well as old” (Matthew 13:52).

In our parish, one of the ways we've pivoted since the pandemic is beginning to move all education, formation, and discipleship resources into a fully online format. Before the pandemic, we had your typical Sunday School offering: bound to a particular time and place, 9am Sundays between services, in our Christian formation classrooms. But amid the pandemic, Episcopalians discovered the internet (even if it was the AOL dialup version), and we were suddenly able to offer Zoom classes that our members would have never tried before. Overnight, we went from a faithful few (~30 regulars) to 100-300+ in online discussion groups—including our current spiritual formation group utilizing [Practicing the Way](#), with praxis-oriented virtual small groups on [Sabbath](#) and [prayer](#).

Proposal Narrative

→ Missional Clarity

Many churches are currently stuck, avowing Thomas's age-old puzzlement: "Lord, *we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?*" And we are needful of Jesus's reply: "*I am* the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:5-6)

More than anything else, within increasingly pluralistic contexts, we desperately need to recover the unmatched centrality of Jesus to our identity and mission. This is especially true for Mainline Protestant denominations, which have tended to downplay the salvific and missional uniqueness of Christ. This means keeping the Great Commandment and Great Commission at the fore: love God, love neighbor, and make disciples. Immediately, though, we are quickly confronted with contextual distinctives: both for the congregation as a whole and its members in their respective mission fields. How do we translate that general commandment and commission into this *particular* time and place?

Prior to the pandemic, we started referring to the "church gathered" vs. "church scattered" paradigm (after hosting a parish consultation with Neil Hudson and our friends at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity). Amid pandemic lockdown restrictions, our church community was suddenly *very* scattered; we grieved the loss of gathering. But, like many churches across the globe, this covid-induced dormancy forced us into a period of self-examination: rediscovering our *why*.

While our mission remains the same (from our deceptively simple catechism: "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ," *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 855), our Vestry undertook an 18-month process to discern a new post-pandemic vision for our church: "to form deeply committed, whole-life disciples of Jesus, for the world, by learning to *be with, become like, and live like* Him in our Monday through Saturday lives."

Everything we are and do will flow out of that whole-life discipleship vision over the years ahead. This will be a culture shift for us, as well as our similarly situated partner parishes, as Mainline churches generally emphasize the "gathered" aspects of church (buildings, ministries, committees, etc.). But as our inherited institutional customs collapse, we see an *opportunity* to reclaim our central task: to make disciples who make disciples.

Two aspects of this vision connect directly to this proposal:

- 1) recovering apprenticeship to Jesus through ancient Christian practice, while reassessing our formation paradigm to ensure accessibility and applicability to on-the-go Christians in a digital age, and,
- 2) equipping the faithful to live out their baptismal vow: "to proclaim by *word* and *example* the Good News of God in Christ" (BCP, pg. 305), especially with new online content aimed at meeting the "nones" wherever they are, addressing pressing life questions (relationships, finances, mental health, grief/loss, current events, etc.).

We believe that developing our digital capacity, in this regard, will be *part* but not *parcel*. As Jay Kim notes in *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (2020): "discipleship requires patience, depth, and community—the very things that stand in contradiction to the values of the digital age" (26).

→ Community Engagement

Archbishop William Temple put it best: "The Church is the only society that exists primarily for the sake of those who are still outside it." Any thriving church will understand it exists for the sake of others.

When our church was first planted out of St. John's Cathedral in 1952, the sum strategy was field-of-dreams: "if we build it, they will come." And they did. Within a postwar boom of burgeoning suburbs, where churchgoing was presumed (the only vexing question being *which* church/denomination), we went from a donated land plot to flourishing parish overnight. That growth was sustained through the early 2000's, when our church was ripped in half by disagreements over human sexuality. For a decade, our parish was in significant decline and turned increasingly inward as the congregation faced potential closure. Following the 2013 calling of our current rector, however, the parish has enjoyed a decade of healing and growth—addressing deep wounds, reordering common life, reorienting to mission, and increasing numerically as a result.

Proposal Narrative

But there is arguably room for us to grow in community engagement. We would like to become, as one of our Vestry members put it, “the kind of church that the neighborhood wouldn’t want to see leave.” We have made some notable commitments (including 10% of our budget to outreach, alongside 10% to our diocese—supporting organizations in our city meeting practical needs, from addiction to incarceration, as well as missions abroad). Yet, part of our challenge is discerning what faithful engagement looks like as a congregation—especially when we have become a destination church for commuters across the Denver metro area. In fact, amid the pandemic, we [mapped our parish membership](#) to identify regional coordinators to meet prayer and practical needs within our community, only to discover our membership is *literally* all over the map. For those traveling upwards of an hour to our church, “local community engagement” may have a very different meaning than those who call central-south Denver home. And now, with our burgeoning *online* community, the straightforward summons is even more complicated.

Still, we know that congregational thriving requires awareness of and engagement with those beyond the walls of our church: both the neighborhood in the immediate vicinity of the gathered church *and* the neighbors we encounter in the mission fields of our everyday lives at home, work, and elsewhere. And still more, those neighbors we might not otherwise encounter without intention—the neglected, forgotten, and further afield. We now must ask (without the law expert’s evasive self-justification): “And who *is* my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29)

We know we are not alone in this, as all parishes in our proposed pilot cohort are asking similar questions:

- from [St. Thomas Medina, WA](#), in Silicon Valley 2.0, where communities across Bellevue and Seattle’s Eastside are exploding with growth, particularly the Asian and Southeast Asian tech workforce (which has grown from [10% in 1990 to over 40% in 2023](#)),
- to [St. Bede’s Santa Fe, NM](#), one of the largest and fastest growing bilingual/bicultural congregations in the Intermountain West, struggling to bridge linguistic, socio-economic, and cultural divides in a now-majority-Hispanic/Latino city (54%) and historically monochrome parish and denomination ([>90% White](#)).

How do we, in ever-changing communities, address the most pressing needs in local neighborhoods, towns, cities and regions—as well nurturing relationships abroad? And how do we do so as whole-life disciples, both through the church *gathered* and as the Monday-through-Saturday church *scattered*?

Areas of Focus

Our main focus is a digital augmentation of our church ecosystem, utilizing hybrid technologies across the board to expand and revitalize current ministries—especially community engagement and whole-life discipleship—while helping other parishes do the same. This includes hybridizing our physical gathering spaces: leveraging our current assets to serve our community/region, assessing potential new funding streams (i.e., renting out new hybrid meeting spaces to outside groups), and furthering our overall mission.

Adapting to Changing Contexts

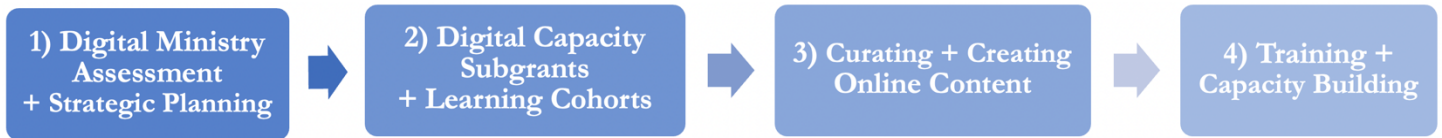
Enhancing our digital capacity will not only position us to better reach uninterested and deconstructed “nones” beyond our walls, but it will also strengthen our existing ministries, connectivity as a dispersed congregation, and facilitate community engagement as whole-life disciples in our local neighborhoods. We have already witnessed some of this amid pandemic pivot to online modalities and we are eager to continue this work.

Grounding in Christian Practices

We believe digital engagement can help foster ancient Christian practices that are, as Peter Maurin put it, “so *old* they look *new*.” While we acknowledge that these practices, in our sin-stained world, are not a panacea and can be “damaged gifts” (as Lauren Winner reminds us in *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 2018), we remain convinced recovery of Christian discipleship practices is central to helping us discern (as individuals and as congregations) what we might do and who we might become. Being with, becoming like, and living like Jesus provides a framework for patters of activity, *virtue*, that brings coherence to congregational life otherwise at risk of utter incoherence—to us and to the world.

Program Design + Activities

Our program design includes four key components:



1) Digital Ministry Assessment + Strategic Planning

We have a grand endpoint: digital adaptation. But *first* we need to do a thorough assessment of our current offerings, assets, and growth opportunities—both for our parish and those joining our peer-mentoring cohorts. A digital ministry assessment and strategic planning with common consultants for a 6-parish pilot peer-mentoring cohort, consisting of at least one *lay* and *clergy* leader from each parish, along with digital capacity subgrants, will chart the course for this overall endeavor. While Christ Church Denver has already begun some of this work internally, engaging these consultants will help us see our parish through outsider’s eyes—as well as bringing peer parishes up to speed in our learning cohort and offering group coaching toward common ends.

- First, working with [The Unstuck Group](#), our parish and pilot peer-mentor cohort will conduct a thorough self-evaluation of our online presence (including website, multi-platform streaming, social media, and online formation content). We will do a deep dive with our analytics and other tools to gain clarity on who is currently interacting with our online content (e.g., regular member attendees, shut-ins, traveling members, relocated previous members, local-seekers perusing before visiting, nonlocal-visitors seeking spiritual guidance, etc.), as well as what gaps we might have in our current digital offerings.
- Second, each parish will create a 5-year strategic plan to prioritize our digital development along an “engagement path,” guiding our content curation/creation based on evangelistic, discipleship, and community engagement needs. Particular attention will be paid not just to the members already within our walls, but unengaged spiritual seekers we know we need to reach with new content.
- Third, in strategic planning, each parish will formalize our team structures and action plans within an integrated digital ministry approach, determining how we will evaluate our effectiveness over time.
- Fourth, we will convene our pilot 6-parish lay/clergy peer-mentoring cohort to review respective assessments/plans, identify opportunities for collaboration and resource sharing, and form the nucleus of a steering committee to guide program expansion. The pilot cohort will meet quarterly (in person and online) for 18 months, with an option for continuation.
- Each parish will be granted Unstuck consulting costs in full (~\$12k/parish) to help us build a common framework and paradigm, alongside continuous group coaching for the first 18 months. Once digital ministry assessment and strategic planning is completed, pilot parishes will also receive matching grants of up to \$15,000 for digital capacity enhancement (additional training, design, technical consultation, and technological improvements—hardware, software, applications, etc.) to address priority needs.

2) Digital Capacity Subgrants + Learning Cohorts

After completing our initial 18-month cohort, we will expand the program to include an additional 25 parishes incorporated into a larger congregational learning community. The pilot cohort will serve as a steering committee for this expansion, with the end goal of 31 peer-mentoring parishes, with at least one *lay* and *clergy* leader from each parish. Backing up from there:

- Each of pilot congregations will be tasked with helping to recruit and mentor their own 18-month, 5-parish peer-learning cohorts—with Christ Church Denver overseeing the whole network and project.

Proposal Narrative

- Applicants to the expanded cohort will be offered up to \$12,000 in matching digital capacity enhancement expenses (training, design, technical consultation, and necessary technological improvements—hardware, software, applications, etc.), alongside congregation-funded consultancies for their own digital ministry assessment and strategic plan development (with Unstuck or consultants of their choosing). The intended result will be a 31-parish, peer-mentored network by the end of Year 3 (2026).
- Both the initial pilot group and subgroups will be overseen by our Program Director, utilizing the peer-mentoring framework of [Caffeinated Church](#) (a four-diocese communications collaborative that regularly convenes such cohorts) for a structured learning process, directly engaging lay/clergy-leader teams to form a supportive, resource-sharing network. All learnings and best practices will be culled, collected, and archived by Caffeinated Church for use by the wider church.

3) Curating + Creating Online Content

After conducting digital content assessments, Christ Church Denver will curate and create content for online discipleship—prioritizing the highest identified needs. This content will include:

- web-optimized videos (with production outsourced to [Otherworldly Productions](#)), small-group study/facilitator guides, podcasts, blog posts, and social media content:
 - for the “*nones*”: new topical resources designed to address life issues, doubt/deconstruction, and lingering questions with open, nonjudgmental, honest, real, and practical resources;
 - for *new believers*: a video-based, digitally-accessible, small-group-discussion oriented catechumenate (modeled on Alpha and Practicing the Way, produced in partnership with the [Catechesis Institute](#)), retrieving ancient resources for the education and formation of modern-day disciples;
- and, for *committed members*: expanded use of [Practicing the Way](#) materials to nurture age-old spiritual practices for the contemporary church, connecting dispersed apprentices of Jesus with their congregation, other congregations, and the wider church through a shared Rule of Life (encompassing the disciplines of Sabbath, prayer, fasting, solitude, Scripture, community, simplicity, generosity, and hospitality).

4) Training + Capacity Building

The aim of our peer-mentoring cohorts will be to work with lay/clergy congregational teams to strengthen participant congregation’s governance and leadership. Additionally, our Program Director will seek to further multiply impact by sharing learnings and best practices through various venues for standalone workshops and trainings, including but not limited to:

- regional and diocesan gatherings in Denver, Colorado, and the Intermountain West,
- the [Denver Institute for Faith & Work](#)’s ecumenical learning luncheons and online pastor cohorts,
- [Caffeinated Church](#)’s [monthly parish collaboration meetings](#) and [expert-led workshops](#),
- the [Gathering of Leaders](#) practical application forums,
- the [Episcopal Church Foundation](#)’s adaptive ministry workshops, and,
- Virginia Theological Seminary’s [Lifelong Learning](#) outlets, including [FORMA](#) (Network for Christian Formation for the Episcopal Church) conferences and [Building Faith](#) resource [articles](#) and [webinars](#).

These offerings will help local congregations grapple with their own distinct challenges, within the wider need for digital adaption to new models of ministry. Understanding how our sacramental and liturgical traditions can (and cannot) be modified, we will resource likeminded Mainline congregations committed to doing this work together—and *as the analog church*, not trying to keep up with the evangelical/nondenominational Joneses (c.f., 1 Samuel 17:32-40). During and after this grant-funded project, our Program Director and Communications Coordinator will remain available for additional training, support, and capacity building. All resources, learnings, and best practices will be freely available online.

Proposal Narrative

Peer-Mentor Cohort Selection

Based on the Gathering of Leaders' invitational recruitment model, our initial six-parish pilot cohort will consist of already relationally networked congregations with existing affinities, institutional buy-in, and contextual distinctives:

[Christ Episcopal Church](#)—Denver, CO (*convenor*)
[St. Gabriel's Episcopal Church](#)—Denver, CO
[Church of the Epiphany](#)—Denver, CO

[Bethany Lutheran Church](#)—Denver, CO
[St. Bede's Episcopal Church](#)—Santa Fe, NM
[St. Thomas Episcopal Church](#)—Medina, WA

This invited pilot cohort meets several criteria: analog churches in the median Mainline (~75-300 worshippers) desiring clarity on post-pandemic digital engagement, within Denver and the American West, committed to whole-life discipleship and congregational thriving, with clarity on what we *are* and *are not* endeavoring through online engagement. There is also sufficient differentiation, including size (100-2,000 members), budgets (\$500k-\$2M), and identified needs/missional priorities in local contexts.

Each of these parishes will commit to: 1) participating in an initial 18-month, 6-parish, lay/clergy peer-mentoring pilot cohort (January 2024 – June 2025) and 2) recruiting and convening their own 18-month, 6-parish, peer-mentoring cohort (January 2026 – June 2027). This will multiply the reach of learning engagement from 6 parishes initially (Years 1-2) to an additional 25—or 31 total (Years 3-4).

Organizational Interest + Capacity

Christ Church Denver is the second largest Episcopal parish in the Diocese of Colorado, with an operating budget of \$1.7M and staff of 8 FT + 6 PT staff (including one PT/remote clergyperson based in Seattle, WA, the proposed Program Director for this project). The majority of our operating funds (\$1.2M) are derived from 181 pledging units, with an average pledge of \$6,740 (more than *double* [the national Episcopal average](#): \$3,339)—43% of which is now given online (\$580k *p.a.*). Additional revenue is generated through facility rentals and other means. Alongside healthy reserves, the parish's operating cash and designated funds top \$2.1M with total net assets over \$3.1M.

The Rev. Terry McGugan has served as rector since 2013, overseeing a decade of sustained growth (+47% attendance, +48% giving). In accordance with [national/diocesan constitutions/canons](#) and parish bylaws, Christ Church Denver is governed by a 9-member lay board (“vestry”) recruited by vestry members and elected at our annual congregational meeting.

As a resource congregation in our diocese, we already have deep and longstanding relationships of mutual learning, ministerial collaboration, and reciprocal trust. During the pandemic, we not only pivoted online *ourselves* but aided numerous churches in the [High Plains Region](#) and our wider diocese to livestream worship, produce video content, and develop a social media presence. Overnight, we become a regional destination for hybrid gatherings: including church meetings (from regional convocation to diocesan convention) and sacramental services (from Sunday worship to baptisms, weddings, funerals, and more).

Within our denomination, often the Office of the Bishop is best equipped—with requisite organizational capacity—to lead an initiative like this. In our case, with a budget and staff approaching our diocesan office, we are aiming to provide *congregational leadership for a multi-parish collaboration* in tandem with our Bishop and Canon for Communications & Evangelism (both of whom have provided support letters, attached).

Collaborations + Partnerships

Our partnerships will include:

- **Peer-Mentoring Parishes:** Our closest and most important collaborators will be the lay/clergy teams in our initial six (then subsequent twenty-five) peer-mentoring parishes.
- **The High Plains Region + Episcopal Diocese of Colorado:** Having already procured seed grant support for this project from the [High Plains Region](#) (a convocation of 26 parishes of [The Episcopal Church in Colorado](#)), we will continue to work collaboratively with our Regional Missioner and

Proposal Narrative

longstanding parish partnerships in the Denver metro area to recruit for peer-learning cohorts, convene best-practice workshops, and disseminate learnings. We will also continue to engage with our wider diocese and denomination as we seek likeminded partners and disseminate best practices.

- **Caffeinated Church:** This four-diocese collaborative (encompassing Colorado, Atlanta, East Tennessee, and Maryland) will be a key partner in helping to structure, format, and facilitate our peer-mentoring cohorts—based on their [existing paradigm](#). Caffeinated Church will also be [the enduring platform](#) for all resources and best practices we develop (free of charge to all).
- **The Unstuck Group:** For over 14 years, [The Unstuck Group](#) has helped 600+ churches clarify their vision (where they believe God has called them) and strategies (how they are going to get there) through their unique church consulting process—including [strategic planning for digital ministry](#). These proven consultants will help our initial 6-parish cohort build a common conceptual framework: undertaking a conjoined assessment, planning, and implementation process, with a shared conception of digital engagement. In addition to ongoing implementation coaching for pilot participants, full consulting services will also be made available to subsequent cohort members.
- **Ecumenical Judicatory Partners:** Beyond the Episcopal Church, our closest regional ecumenical collaborators are the [Rocky Mountain Synod](#) (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) and [Rocky Mountain Conference](#) (United Methodist Church). The bishops of each have, in recent years, committed to an ever-closer collaboration; we will use both our existing parish relationships and official church channels to recruit peer-parish cohorts and disseminate best practices beyond denominational bounds.

Outcomes + Evaluation

As noted above, this project has three primary outputs: 1) virtual community-engaging content, 2) digital whole-life discipleship resources, and 3) a learning cohort of likeminded Mainline churches.

We will continuously monitor and measure intended output impact with the following *performance indicators*:

Quantitative performance indicators, including the total number of:

- *congregational* participants in our collaborative peer-mentoring cohorts,
 - at least 31 congregations (including Christ Church Denver as convenor alongside our 5 pilot members, and a subsequent 25 participant parishes);
- *individual congregational leader* participants committed to cross-congregational partnership,
 - consisting of lay/clergy teams from each participant parish, comprising 60+ congregational leaders;
- *congregational participants* in our hybrid discipleship offerings, both for our parish and partner parishes,
 - overall number of people attending hybrid/online offerings, compared to in-person alternatives;
- new *online resources created*, including appropriate engagement analytics,
 - ~25 web-optimized videos, blog posts, study guides, etc., measured by clicks, views, shares, etc.;
- innovative *online ministries*, including new and reimagined/revitalized ministries,
 - measuring both the ministries themselves and the number of people they reach (e.g., a new GriefShare online support group intended especially for those not already connected to a church);
- *virtual volunteers* engaged in new, or revitalized/expanded, online offerings,
 - from virtual vergers to digital greeters to content creators, total number of volunteers in online roles;
- *funds raised* through expanded outreach, especially to our growing online congregation,
 - measured both in overall giving (currently, for our parish, \$1.2M with \$580k *p.a.* given online), giving units, and proportion giving online (currently 43%), benchmarked with peer parishes.

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Our *qualitative* performance indicators will include:

- a heightened *engagement with whole-life discipleship*, in our parish and partner parishes,
 - being with, becoming like, and living like Jesus in our Monday through Saturday lives;
- clarity about our *community engagement model*,
 - both as the church gathered and scattered, institutional and individual, and as a congregation alongside other congregations and community partners;
- a deeper connection between *individual (and dispersed) members and their parish mission/vision*,
 - including ability to articulate this mission/vision and how it is germane to their daily rhythms/practices;
- a deeper connection between *individual congregations/congregational leaders* in our peer-mentoring cohorts,
 - fostering collaboration and mutual encouragement as we face common challenges;
- a *heightened missional urgency* when it comes to *discipleship* and *evangelism*,
 - including a more robust awareness of social/cultural trends and our individual/collective response.

Our Program Director will be responsible for the ongoing and final evaluation of this project, both within our own parish and benchmarking with other peer-mentor parishes to gauge overall impact. In accordance with the above enumerated quantitative and qualitative measures, we will be keeping a close eye on germane metrics and craft interviews, focus groups, and online surveys for cohort participants, congregational leaders, volunteers, and our 31-member network of parishes. All data will be culled into a midcourse (Year 3) and final (Year 5) project report.

Communication

In addition to a robust social media strategy (especially for the new digital content we produce), we will engage numerous communications outlets for various audiences:

- for *potential participants and collaborators*: we will utilize existing relational networks as well as [regional](#), [diocesan](#), [synodical](#), [conference](#), and [denominational](#) outlets to publicize our open subgrant call for proposals;
- for *the general public*, we will share insights, resources, best practices, and stories through a variety of outlets:
 - diocesan/judicatory and denominational circulars, from the [Colorado Episcopalian](#) and [Episcopal News Service](#) to inter-Anglican print/online periodicals [The Living Church](#) and [Earth & Altar](#) to our Mainline partner [synodical](#), [conference](#), and [ELCA / UMC](#) channels;
 - traditional media outlets, from [The Denver Post](#) to [Religion News Service](#) to [The Conversation](#);
 - newsletters of partner organizations, particularly [Caffeinated Church](#), and affiliate organizations ([Gathering of Leaders](#), [Episcopal Church Foundation](#), [VTS Lifelong Learning](#), etc.);
 - as well as academic journals, from ‘Practicing Theology’ in the [Anglican Theological Review](#) and [Journal of Anglican Studies](#) to [The New Atlantis](#) and [Pro Ecclesia](#), (addressing not just the *mechanics* of this project but *whether, why, and how* more traditional churches might prudently integrate technology).

We anticipate *future funders* for us and partnering congregations will largely be the faithful givers in our pews. Nevertheless, our online engagement to date has already opened new horizons—with contributing members well beyond traditional parish bounds. As we seek to broadly publicize and promote digital ministry for the median Mainline, we remain open to unanticipated possibilities.

Sustainability

Ongoing program costs will essentially consist of staffing (~\$135k *p.a.*), along with ancillary operational costs. We project that even a modest growth (~15%) in our plate-and-pledge income over the next 5 years (which has steadily grown over 48% since 2012) will more than cover the long-term viability of this project. We are especially keen to

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grow our online giving (already \$580k *p.a.*, or 43% of our plate-and-pledge), particularly with our new—and, pre-pandemic, entirely unforeseen—category of “digital members.”

Alongside in-parish fundraising efforts, Christ Church Denver is also in the early stages of pursuing additional grant support from The Episcopal Church’s [New Communities Fund](#), Trinity Wall Street, and other foundations. We do not have any further income support at this time, though Lilly’s support will allow us to launch this project while we seek additional funding.



CHRIST CHURCH DENVER

BE WITH, BECOME LIKE, LIVE LIKE JESUS

Thriving Congregations Initiative

Program Timetable

January 1, 2024 – December 31, 2028

2024 / Year 1

Q1: January – March

- *Program Director (PD)*: convene first in-person pilot peer-mentor cohort meeting, review cohort/grant stipulations, disburse consultancy/capacity grant funds (objective: 6 confirmed pilot participants by mid-Jan)
- *Communications Coordinator (CC)*: prepare grant recipient press releases to appropriate judicatory outlets

Q2: April – June

- *PD*: commence quarterly Zoom pilot peer-mentor cohort meeting
- *PD/CC*: complete Q2 Unstuck Digital Ministry Health Assessment (1-day on-site meeting)
- *CC*: cull/distribute pilot peer-mentor cohort Unstuck Digital Ministry Health Assessments

Q3: July – September

- *PD/CC*: complete Q3 Unstuck Strategic Planning (2-day on-site meeting, 16 hours)
- *CC*: cull/distribute pilot peer-mentor cohort Unstuck Strategic Plans

Q4: October – December

- *CC*: prepare Y1 EOY report

2025 / Year 2

Q1: January – March

- *PD/CC*: guided by Unstuck Strategic Plan(s), begin first round of targeted video content (~12 videos + study guides, etc.) with Otherworldly Productions
- *PD*: draft and disseminate baseline qualitative surveys for parishes to measure pre-/post-program impact

Q2: April – June

- *CC*: begin social media campaigns with new online content

Q3: July – September

- *PD*: prompt pilot peer-mentors to begin recruitment for subgrant applications/cohort expansion
- *CC*: circulate open CFP through appropriate diocesan, judicatory, and denominational outlets

Q4: October – December

- *PD*: receive/review subgrant applications with pilot peer-mentor steering committee, notify awardees
- *CC*: prepare Y2 EOY report

2026 / Year 3

Q1: January – March

- *PD*: convene expanded peer-mentor cohort, review cohort/grant stipulations, disburse subgrants funds (objective: 25 new peer-mentor parishes, overseen in groups of 5 by pilot cohort parishes)

Q2: April – June

- *PD/CC*: begin second round of video production (objective: ~13 additional videos by EOY3)

Q3: July – September

- *PD*: convene quarterly Zoom pilot peer-mentor cohort meeting

Q4: October – December

- *CC*: prepare Y3 EOY report

2027 / Year 4

Q1: January – March

- *PD/CC*: cull/solidify virtual volunteer position descriptions based on developed best practices
- *PD*: seek/solidify sustainable congregational financial support, referencing measurable impact (objective: >\$150k in new pledged income + hybrid facility rental)

Q2: April – June

- *PD/CC*: begin sharing learnings, resources, best practices more intentionally through various church forums

Q3: July – September

- *PD*: cull quantitative/qualitative impact measures from pilot cohort and subgrantees

Q4: October – December

- *CC*: prepare Y4 EOY report

2028 / Year 5

Q1: January – March

- *PD/CC*: measure qualitative congregational impact(s) with new parish survey, focus groups, etc.

Q2: April – June

- *PD/CC*: draft congregational report with insights on community engagement model(s)

Q3: July – September

- *CC*: prepare Y5 EOY

Q4: October – December

- *PD/CC*: prepare project summary report, including all impacts, resources, best practices, and qualitative/quantitative performance indicators