

St James Worship Review - survey results Sept 2010

46 people completed the survey.

This summary of results should be read alongside the SurveyMonkey output of results, which are saved in this file:

WorshipSurvey.html

Summary of Responses

1. How old are you?

There were no respondents under 30.

Those who did respond were roughly evenly split between the 31-50 age group, and the 51-70 group.

2. How long have you attended St James?

On the whole, respondents had a long-standing relationship to St James, with nearly two thirds having attended for more than five years.

More than one-third had attended for more than ten years, and nearly one quarter for over 20.

3. How important is it to you that...?:

Responses to this question showed remarkable similarity. In all but two of the ten questions, the number of supporters for each option rose fairly steadily through the spectrum from option 1 (not at all important) through to option 4 (very important), and then tailed off with option 5 (essential).

In the two other responses, there was no tailing off, and option 5 (essential) was the most important. This applied to "we run our services in a way that accommodates the needs of children and young people", and "there is always an element of creativity in our worship".

In other words, for at least half of respondents, accommodating children, and ensuring creativity in worship, were regarded as essential.

The other eight options had the greatest level of support for the 'very important' option - suggesting that all of these eight are highly valued by much of the congregation.

The most ambivalent responses (i.e. those which had a high number of 'votes' for 'moderately important', or 'not very important' - say a combined percentage of over 45%) were those to do with the importance of: intellectual understanding of faith; engaging with the wider community of Leith; and functioning as a supportive community during the week.

Further responses are explored in 'Section 2: Please Comment Further' on p5.

4. How well do you think that...?:

"How well do you think that we engage with the concerns of other communities in Leith?" was the only one of these ten questions where the largest vote went to option 2 ('slightly well').

Four other questions attracted the largest 'vote' for option 3 ('moderately well'). These concerned sermons, welcoming visitors, balancing the needs of adult and children, and how well our building serves our needs. However, this obscures the fact that, except for sermons, these questions narrowly missed attracting the largest vote for option 4 ('very well'). In other words, these responses were weighted towards a very positive appraisal.

Only "How well do you think that our reflections (sermons) help you to develop a faith perspective on your everyday life?" was not weighted towards the positive end of the spectrum, but was balanced evenly on the 'moderately well' option.

Five questions attracted the largest 'vote' for option 4 ('very well'). These related to music, liturgical structure, inclusivity, harnessing skills, and the transformations.

Further comments are explored in 'Section 2: Please Comment Further' on p5.

The most resounding support was in response to the question: "How well do you think that the transformation of the space enables you to engage with the Christian story at each season?", to which more than two-thirds of respondents gave the answer 'very well' or 'outstandingly well'.

5. How do you feel about your current commitment to volunteering in St James?

The vast majority of respondents chose "It feels about right."

About a quarter said they 'could do more if they felt motivated', or were 'just waiting to be asked.'

Two felt burdened by their commitments.

This suggests that there is some scope, if limited, for taking on new initiatives requiring volunteers. Anything new would need to be sufficiently inspiring to attract commitment.

6. If you could change one thing about our worship, what would it be?

Responses are explored in 'Section 3: What would you change?' on p7 below.

7. Why do you come to church?

Responses are explored in 'Section 4: Why do you come?' on p8 below.

8. Which statement most closely describes your attitude to attending Sunday worship at St James?

As discussed on p6 below, several people disliked the way this question was framed, and 7 people skipped it.

Of the remaining 39 respondents, over 80% opted for one of the first two options. Such folk either see it as their duty (and joy!) to attend most Sundays, or they at least try to attend given other commitments.

A smaller, but significant, proportion (18%) feel positive towards St James, but do not feel the same pull to try to attend regularly.

Since some of the comments feared that this question might have an element of 'checking up' on attendance, it is worth underlining that the purpose of the question was to gain a sense of *attitudes* towards respondents' own practice, without making any judgments about this.

Further responses are explored in 'Section 2: Please Comment Further' on p5.

9. Which of the following statements best describes your understanding of the purpose of the local church?

Each respondent had just 3 'votes' to distribute between 9 possible definitions of the the purpose of the church.

Three of the nine options received a majority of support: 'The church exists to worship God', 'to nourish its members with Word and Sacrament'; and 'to serve the poor and challenge injustice in society.'

The first of these is a fairly universal understanding of the purpose of the church, while the second reflects more of a Reformation view, while the third reflects more recent trends in liberal Protestantism and Catholic Liberation Theology.

Next most popular were definitions of the church that focused on (a slightly Celtic understanding of) community life, (a theologically broad view of) evangelism, and (a fairly Catholic) understanding of the church as a mediator of God's grace.

In other words, we are quite eclectic in our theology!

Possibly, this breadth of views indicates certain tensions in what we think St James ought to be. For example, are we here for a more evangelical emphasis on preaching and mission? Or are our concerns to be more focussed on justice and radical community? At the very least, it may be important to acknowledge that these differences exist among us.

10. Thinking about the kind of ministry you might hope would be exercised within St James, how would you rank the following Biblical roles?

This may have been a duff question, in that it confused quite a lot of people.

About one third of respondents skipped it, while others complained they couldn't make it work, or they felt the categories were incoherent.

Nevertheless, there were 32 responses. The question invited respondents to rank 7 biblical ministry roles into order of importance for them, in relation to the kind of ministry they would like to see exercised in St James. In other words, each role could only be assigned one number, whether 1st, 2nd, 3rd place etc.

On the results table, each Biblical role is given a 'rating average'. Since the most preferred role is 1, and least is 7, it follows that the most desired role overall is the one with the lowest rating average.

It turns out that the kind of ministry that people most want to see is 'pastor-teacher', followed by 'servant', and then 'prophet' (defined as 'social critic' rather than seer). The three least popular roles are 'leader', 'evangelist', and 'apostle' (defined as a spiritual 'entrepreneur', rather than one of the 12!)

Perhaps these roles reflect the tension that we have already identified within our definitions of church. While the 'votes' are cast here in favour of, perhaps, the more earthy, 'grass-roots' roles of pastor, servant and social critic, clearly others also value the 'stronger', more individualistic ideals of ministry embodied in the 'leader', the 'evangelist', and the 'apostle'.

If so, it is important once again to notice that different people in the church value different forms of ministry differently!

Section 2: 'Please comment further'...

At three points in the survey respondents were invited to 'Please comment further'.

These comments ranged widely, since they were not in response to any direct question.

The three questions they followed up were:

"How important to you is it that...?"

"How well do you think that...?"

"Which statement most closely describes your attitude to attending Sunday worship at St James."

The following themes stand out:

Inclusivity and community is valued - particularly that inclusivity which enables people to be themselves, bring their difference, or their hurts, and providing 'real human contact'. 'It is the imperfection and humanity of the place which is most dear to me.' Others noted the power of the transformations in 'building the common life of the church.' By contrast, one respondent clearly felt *not* included, complaining that there are 'only cliques' at St James. Another observed that 'there is no ongoing support during the week.'

Creativity is valued - and is also seen as 'what we do really well', whether in our worship or in a wider sense of the creative bringing together of ideas and people. The transformation was seen as a powerful way to convey a church that is always journeying. Others expressed support for the transformations while also wondering whether there are less labour-intensive ways of doing them.

Every-member ministry is valued - including the contributions of both adults and children. However, there was some criticism that 'it is all too often only the same few', while another respondent would like to see more women preaching.

More awe and reverence in our worship is hoped for - 'an occasion for encounter with the living God.' Others expressed a desire for our emotions to be more engaged, and for us to take the risk of more spontaneity.

More outward-focus is sought, e.g. avoiding doing 'a few off-putting things' for the sake of newcomers, and doing more 'in terms of mission/evangelism'. Others had 'mixed feelings' about having too great an involvement in the local community since we have very limited resources; and the issue was also raised of whether the community at large want to engage with *us*.

Other limitations were aired. Some said they enjoyed the balance of 'traditional liturgy with modern music', while for others parts of the liturgy is 'depressing' and 'Always disasters and sin.' For one respondent 'the music people have done really well this last year or so and should be encouraged and supported in this', while for others it is 'mostly very helpful', but sometimes 'less than polished.' The circular arrangement of chairs was also noted as unhelpful for those who want to 'lose themselves in prayer or feel great grief.'

Attitudes to attending

Possibly this question didn't work very well, and certainly it drew a lot of additional comments!

In writing the first option, "I see it as my duty to attend church most Sundays", I chose the word 'duty' very carefully, in order to test how many of us belong to a wider cultural trend that feels negative towards the concept of duty. The strong reaction against the word in the responses suggests that a good many of us *do* dislike the notion, although this first option was still the majority choice (45%). For a much smaller proportion (about 18% who chose options 3-5) church attendance is more like a lifestyle choice that might be made alongside others. Some feared that asking this was to 'question people's commitment' and was in danger of implying that occasional attenders are 'less a part of the church.'

The weakness of the question is that it left no room for people to express their willing and joyful motivations for attending church. Consequently, several said 'none of the above'. However, the overall outcome of the question indicates that a very high proportion (over 80%) of us are committed attenders (however frequent or otherwise). This is important to establish as a basis for other discussions around building community, or starting new initiatives.

Comment

Although this was a mixed bag of responses, it does reflect some typical responses from across the survey regarding what we do and don't do well. Inclusivity, creativity, and every-member ministry are clearly strengths - with the caveat that a living community can exclude as well as include. The question of what *kind* of community we want to be also came to the fore (just for Sundays, or 7 days a week?; local and engaged, or a gathered 'niche-market' community?; polished performances, or inclusive of diverse abilities?)

Criticisms are also made, concerning the degree to which our Sunday worship really is 'worshipful', and concerning to what extent we are engaged missionally with the world around us. These seem valid criticisms well worth exploring. Music, liturgy and the layout of the space drew mixed responses - a reminder that we're never going to have complete agreement as to what we want out of church.

Section 3: What would you change?

Music

The area which attracted most comment from people is our music. Several respondents noticed that St James' musical tradition lies between the traditional 'hymn-singing' style of worship, and the more contemporary 'chorus-singing' mode. (*Common Ground* deliberately places itself on this territory.) Beyond that, respondents' wishes differed.

Several wished for 'the occasional more trad. hymn', in contrast to a style they felt was 'all very folksy'. Several others wished for music that was more 'upbeat', 'prolonged', and 'exuberant'. Some wished for a balance of both.

Practicing music before the start of the service drew two or three heartfelt and trenchant comments, including, 'it's worship, not a concert', and 'I so hate this weekly agony!' Related to this, were two or three pleas to start on time.

Several comments wished for more 'quiet' in our services. This was expressed as a desire for more 'silence', 'meditative songs', and 'stuff without words'.

Children

A second area which drew a lot of comment is the place of children in our services. Some longed for children to be better served, 'in terms of space, activity, creating a sense of belonging'; or inviting the children to lead a service once a year. Others wanted services to be more 'fun', 'accessible', and more involving of children in the liturgy. For others, the wish was that children should be taken out to the creche more, or kept quieter in services, and encouraged to do less 'stomping'. Several people mentioned the noisy nature of our wooden floor.

Liturgy

The third broad area of comment had to do with our liturgy. There was a concern that liturgy might become stale if the form never varies; and that there could be scope for teaching people about it so that our use of it is more informed. Others encouraged the taking of more risks, and the linking of our worship with 'a sense of mission'. For some there was a feeling that our services lack 'some spiritual aspect, some sanctity and reverence', and some folk longed for 'more God-focus' and 'more heart.'

Comment

Clearly several of the wishes outlined above are in tension with one another, reflecting familiar differences found in the wider church. Some would prefer our music to be more traditional, others less so. Some would like more quiet in our services; others would like children to be more present and involved. There is no simple way forward here, but a need for different interests within the church to be flexible with one another.

Some other comments would need more unpacking to work out what is wanted - e.g. what would count as an increase in 'spirituality'? Would this, for example, require more silence, or more exuberant praise? Or both?

Section 4: 'Why do you come?'

There were three main answers to this question which were repeated many times in different ways.

To worship God

This was expressed in various ways, including 'to have quiet time to chat to God', 'to connect with the reality of God', and simply 'to worship God.'

To meet with others

Again, this was a very common theme expressed in many ways, including: 'for the warmth, friendship, fellowship, and caring'; 'sociability, support'; 'Christian community is important'; and 'to be part of a fellowship of believers.'

To grow in faith

This was expressed in ways such as: 'to develop spiritually'; 'to be challenged'; 'to be reminded what faith is really about'; and 'for support of my faith journey.'

Not all views expressed were positive. One respondent commented, 'Haven't heard an inspiring sermon in a while'. Another commented that, while they come out of duty, 'the current state of life at St J is driving me away' and one other felt that 'for many years St J filled the need, but not now. Starting to look elsewhere.'

Two further themes were apparent. One reason why people came was for the sake of bringing up children in the faith, or giving them exposure to religion: 'it's important that my children are introduced to the idea of faith.' A second reason was to do with folk wanting to be part of something larger than themselves: 'I like to think about things other than myself'; 'to stop my religious life being merely individual'; to put life in perspective, and to worship God 'in the context of the Church worldwide.'

Comment

There was considerable agreement between respondents concerning their reasons for coming to church. The way these reasons were expressed suggests that, to some extent at least, these expectations are met for many at St James. Some quite critical comments also need to be taken seriously. The difficulty here is that the vagueness of the description makes these hard to address.

Conclusion

The survey has yielded a large amount of information, both qualitative and quantitative, which provides a snapshot of attitudes of a good proportion of the adults at St James.

Some of the comments reveal tensions within our corporate understanding of what the church should be and do, and how we should worship together on a Sunday. It is likely that these issues will continue to be areas requiring ongoing negotiation and flexibility among members. The constructive way in which nearly all of this feedback has been expressed suggests that as a congregation we are well placed to continue this conversation.

Other comments reveal areas where there is, quiet simply, 'room for improvement'. It is these areas where hopefully we can take an honest and constructively critical look at ourselves, to see how we can do things better, for the sake of our community, and to the glory of God.

The overwhelming impression that I get, however, from these responses, is of a church that values highly what we share together, which enjoys meeting for worship, and which feels reasonably confident that we are doing well what we have set out to do. No doubt there are real issues to be addressed: but we can also be thankful to God that our 'glass' is at least half full; and more than that, in places it "runneth over."

Let's continue the conversation!

Duncan MacLaren
September 2010