

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ESSEX CONNECTICUT

PARISH PROFILE

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MEET ST. JOHN'S, A FAITH COMMUNITY OPEN TO GROWTH



Where we are

St. John's Episcopal Church stands on Main Street in Essex village, a half mile from the bank of the Connecticut River. Our parishioners come from a several-town radius that includes Deep River, Chester, Haddam, and Middletown to its north, Old Saybrook to its south, New Haven to its west, and Old Lyme to its east. The church organized before the American Revolution, when many of these communities were called Saybrook Colony and when services began in secret. Our stone church in Essex is our third building. It was built in 1897 using materials from a local quarry. Although in its earlier centuries people called St. John's a country church, today we see ourselves as a thriving metropolitan parish in a bustling historic region within a few hours of major cities.

Our openness to growth

Inspired by our rectors of the past few decades, we find ourselves open to ever-new ways of sharing Jesus outside the building, for our own good and others'. Below, we describe ways we reach out beyond our walls. Our rectors have helped us imagine what we could do and shown us that the Holy Spirit has nudged us to act. We envision our next priest will continue leading us in those directions, inspiring us to be light in the world.

Our active laity

We put our best energy into running the church and its Sunday and special services. We have a strong paid and volunteer professional staff. These include a parttime minister of worship life, parttime music director, fulltime office administrator and communications director, parttime events organizer, and parttime sexton. Parishioners rotate service on our Vestry and on our volunteer-led ministries. We will work with our next rector to keep these strong and do more.

Our worship traditions and growth in the faith

Our services are inspired by the Anglican tradition. Yet, our worship is not limited by orthodoxy, and our services range from traditional to informal. We maintain ministries for personal growth (formation) that include a just-ended year of reading the entire Bible.



OUR OPENNESS TO GROWTH

We see ourselves as a healthy parish, one that came through the COVID-19 pandemic without losing too much ground, but we hope our next rector will help us grow, not just in numbers. A new priest will help us create and live into a future-focused vision through the development of a shared philosophy, mission statement, and vision statement.

Growth can look different, we realize, than former or typical definitions. One reason is that our membership skews a little older than some churches, although we remain committed to young people.

The United States average for under-18 populations is nearly 22 percent, but in our region, under-18 people comprise just over 16 percent. The older (over-65) population nationwide makes up less than 18 percent, while in our region that older group comprises 23 percent. Regular attendees at St. John's include fewer children than a few decades to a century ago. We operated a traditional Sunday School for many decades, but lately, our regular youth programs have been event and service-connected. We seek a priest who will guide us to engage families in ways that help them fit us in to their busy schedules and also welcome them if they are new to worship. We also want to welcome children who visit here as grandchildren or relatives of our parishioners.

We seek to continue growing in our practice as an inclusive congregation. A new priest will help us see our own blind spots in this area. Our region's population is 90 percent white, according to recent Census data, but we know that focusing on the majority isn't the whole picture. Asians make up 3 percent; 5 percent are mixed race, and smaller pockets of ethnic and immigrant groups from places like Brazil and Tibet live near us. We are eager to ensure that we welcome, and interact with, those of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds here and elsewhere. We seek to deepen the way we reach beyond our walls to partner with underserved communities in our town and state.

We wish to continue efforts we've started to embrace and engage the LGBTQ+ community. We hope our priest will help us embrace people from other faith traditions, diverse socioeconomic circumstances, neurodiverse individuals, and those with unique physical and intellectual abilities.

We saw the possibilities of drawing in newcomers in new ways with a 5 p.m. Sunday service we held for three years. It began outside during the COVID-19 pandemic. Families, older adults, and immunocompromised members of our community attended. So did faith-seekers who did not feel comfortable in traditional church services. We are open to guidance in whether to reinstate that service or offer something different, and our new priest can help us figure this out. We recognize that untraditional and informal services can attract newcomers and better serve some of our members.

We are eager to expand our engagement with the Episcopal Church of Connecticut, other parishes, the regional Episcopal community through initiatives including developing a plan to share *The Saint John's Bible* more widely and continuing our tradition of hosting seminarians from Yale Divinity School.



ENCOURAGE OUR ACTIVE LAITY

Our dedicated lay ministry program includes at least 100 volunteers under the direction of our Minister of Worship Life. These dedicated workers expect much from themselves and St. John's. We seek a rector who will tap into people's strengths for volunteer ministries that include the seasoned, hardworking Building and Ground Committee, Stewardship Committee, Altar Guild, Lay Readers, Eucharistic Ministers and Visitors, Newcomers Committee, and Outreach Committee.

A new priest will guide us to renew ministries that were thriving before the pandemic. These include flower delivery, prayer ministry, and acolyte development.

Our involvement with the Shoreline Soup Kitchen, a regional meal program, and an offshoot program we started this year called Bill's Blessings, deserve a special mention. St. John's hosts weekly meals in our kitchen on Tuesday nights run by a roster of 35 volunteers. Bill's Blessings is a free store in our building that provides paper products, toiletries, and other necessities not covered by food stamps. Sixteen volunteers work at Bill's Blessings.

In late September 2024 we invited the public to the 81st annual St. John's Rummage Sale. This year, we funneled proceeds to outreach initiatives, a practice we've followed at times in past years.

Members of our church helped spearhead and research the Witness Stones Project partnership with local public schools. The project aimed to "restore the history and honor the humanity of enslaved individuals who helped build our communities." Through this work, we honored Violet, an enslaved parishioner who was baptized at St. John's. A memorial stone with her name resides in our contemplation garden. During research, St. John's members found records showing an enslaved musician named Sawney Freeman had lived in Essex. They found his handwritten musical scores in the Watkinson Library of Trinity College, and our music director transcribed the notations into a modern score and performed one of his songs at St. John's.

Members of our church have a long-standing affiliation with Habitat for Humanity of Middlesex County. Parishioners have worked on several house projects.

We look to reinvigorate and expand our current efforts as well as envision new outreach ministries that allow us to connect with and serve our community and the world beyond our region.

We seek a rector who is eager to periodically share pastoral leadership, especially in the area of sermons and formation. For example, several members of our congregation are retired clergy, and we have close proximity to Yale Divinity School, and this results in many meaningful partnerships.



GUIDE WORSHIP AND LITURGY

Our next priest will help us advance our spirituality for a modern world while respecting our traditions. Our worship is rooted in Anglican traditions. At St. John's, we hold great respect for these traditions while exploring opportunities to translate them for the present day.

We primarily use Rite II language from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer and have used other Episcopal formats at our main service. We worship with Rite I at some services in certain seasons. Our services range from traditional to informal. Besides our outdoor services, we hold weeknight prayers at times led by laypeople.

We maintain a strong music program that draws parishioners from near and far. Our music director leads a choir of volunteers and some professionals. The choir sings at the main service, and a few times a year sings weeknight Evensong and Taizé services.

Our other special services include Blue Christmas in December and a popular Easter Sunrise service. We partner with an Episcopal church from a neighboring community to conduct Monday services at Essex Meadows, a continuing care retirement community.



GUIDE US TO GROW IN FAITH

For one year from September 2022 to August 2023, St. John's hosted *The Saint John's Bible* Heritage Edition. This illuminated Bible, with text in beautiful calligraphy, held a major place in Sunday services and programs. A team of parishioners held quiet days with the edition at St. John's, where people could linger over the artwork. The team hosted more than fifteen events for visiting groups; took the Bible to visit at least seven other churches in Bridgeport, Darien, and elsewhere; and visited a senior housing community in Middletown with the books. After a year of leasing part of *The Saint John's Bible*, a parishioner anonymously donated one of only 299 sets of the limited Heritage Edition, securing the Bible's permanent place in our church and ensuring the continuation of our programs centered around it.

The following program year, from fall 2023 to fall 2024, many members read the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation, discussing their reading at two Bible study classes. Six instructors (including ordained, a seminarian, and laypeople) taught these classes, which were attended by 25 to 35 people.

Three of our staff members attended the College for Congregational Development, a comprehensive training program for Episcopal parishes, at its Maryland center.

Our other formation activities include parishioner-led contemplative prayer, Advent and Lenten evening prayer, and quiet days. Two instructors and a dozen attendees took part in a faith leadership program at St. John's. All of these have brought connection and meaning to many parishioners, and we seek to continue and expand on them.



OUR NEXT PRIEST: STRONG IN FAITH, CONNECTION AND LEADERSHIP

We seek a priest who will lead us to be stronger Christians.

We seek a priest devoted joyfully to Christ's love while performing liturgical duties. We seek a leader committed to pastoral care.

This priest will cultivate strong connections with the Episcopal Church and affiliated organizations, the Episcopal Church of Connecticut and parishes throughout the state, and the interfaith community throughout our region, inspiring members of our congregation to do the same.

Our next priest will live in our region and take part in community life.

This leader will challenge us to live in the courage of Christ's example, caring for the environment and nurturing a more socially just world.

Finally, our next priest will, we hope, invite us to value all persons and strive to welcome and include seekers.



PARISH WEBSITE

<https://www.stjohnsessex.org/>

