

Two vibrant Anglican congregations in Winnipeg

## **St. Margaret's and saint ben's take different approaches to mixing the ancient and the new.**

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [December 19, 2018](#) issue



Worship at saint benedict's table. Photo by Sarah Hodges-Kolisnyk.

When United Church of Canada minister Paul Derry moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba, in the early 2000s, there were seven United Church congregations in his quarter of the city. At the end of 2018, he told me, there was only one. The rest have closed and sold for condos or been merged with other congregations.

Most mainline pastors paying attention these days—in Canada as well as the United States—know that their parish is perhaps ten minutes away from closing. If there is a future for this kind of church, it will be one in which every pastor is something of a church planter, seeding life in the midst of the enormous upheaval in institutional religious life. Not many pastors were trained for this work. How do we do it?

I traveled to Winnipeg because I had heard about two Anglican churches there that were doing innovative things and growing in significant ways. I'd also heard that they represented two opposing wings in the Anglican Church.

One is St. Margaret's, a low-church evangelical parish that is traditionalist on issues of homosexuality—the sort of congregation one might expect to bolt from the denomination and sue to keep the property. The other is saint benedict's table (the church prefers “saint” spelled out and the entire name spelled lower case), which is more liberal on LGBTQ issues and more open to expressions of theological doubt in its liturgy.

The two parishes turned out to be more similar than I had expected. Both combine the thoughtful liturgy and preaching that mark Anglicanism at its best. The two rectors, David Widdicombe, 67, at St. Margaret's, and Jamie Howison, 57, at saint ben's, both hunger to work with young people at the city's several universities, and both sense that the ancient and mysterious aspects of Christianity will be more appealing to people than any seeker-sensitive effort of evangelism that strips down the richness of the faith.

The two are longtime friends and admirers of one another. Neither seems to be aiming for anything other than helping to develop the best church they can. Given his achievements at saint ben's, Howison could have written a book on church growth, or joined the speaking circuit, but he shuddered at that idea. The book that he has written is about jazz musician John Coltrane, *God's Mind in That Music*. He calls the book “delightfully irrelevant to my ministry,” and adds: “but Coltrane feeds me.”

Widdicombe is only a bit less shy in sharing his ministry insights. He has a D. Phil. in theology from Oxford, where he focused on the theology of P. T. Forsyth and worked under Rowan Williams. He tells of getting thrown out of two classrooms—once by a liberal professor, another time by a conservative one—each time over questions of biblical interpretation.

Widdicombe's sermons exude erudition. The day I'm there he preached from the lectionary text on Israel's demand for a king and God's sad warning: "he will take, he will take, he will take." Never mentioning Trump by name, he portrayed all politics as a revolt against the reign of Christ. In some sense, worldly politics *have* to fail—or else we would fail to long for the kingdom Christ will bring. With its Augustinian realism about the continued reign of Babylon, the sermon owed something to another of his teachers at Oxford, Oliver O'Donovan.

Widdicombe made no reference in the sermon to himself, those listening, or the world. His only interest seemed to be in Christ and the text. Afterward, I talked to Marilyn Simons, a Shakespeare scholar who teaches at the local universities and who came to faith at St. Margaret's. She said Widdicombe does with texts what the church and the academy have forgotten how to do: he lovingly interprets them.

He describes his approach this way: "I hold up the scriptures, and say, 'You can disagree with this book—but this is the book you will disagree with.'" Yet there's nothing angry about his approach. His manner is cheerful as he reaches the end of a career in which he's seen his approach working. "If you want young people, they're looking for beauty, for something ancient."

On the Sunday I attended St. Margaret's, ushers counted more than 50 children. One parent told me she is drawn by the pastor's assurance: "The church will take care of the faith of your children." The church holds 180 and it seemed to me it could easily offer another service. Widdicombe inherited a budget of under \$100,000 in the early 2000s, and it's now over \$600,000. He used to joke he would retire when the parish's budget exceeded that of the diocese. He's nearly there.

St. Margaret's has benefited from the number of students attending, and it has launched many into ministry in the congregation. "We take advantage of them in some ways," Widdicombe admitted, meaning that the church puts them to work without a paycheck. There were a dozen folks at pastoral meetings at one point. Donika Bacoka, in her early twenties, tells me she was invited to join the vestry after

only two months at the church. Another participant says of St. Margaret's: "We are a talent-spotting operation."

Widdicombe encourages leaders to initiate pastoral relationships with everyone, not just the sick. The aim is leadership development, not just pastoral care. Go, listen, learn, and folks will come and worship and stay, he says. He observed that if the church is working well and growing, new members and longtime members will be at odds. He recalls telling faithful donors that he was going to spend his time with college students who would never give financially. "And what's worse," he added, "I'm going to ask you to pay for it!"

St. Margaret's has also gained a reputation in the community for its openness to people on the streets. One story is about how the congregation got to know a woman who panhandled regularly outside the church, and who one day took the step of coming inside for worship. The sermon that day was based on the words of Isaiah 55, "Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters, and you who have not money, come and eat." Inspired by those words, Debbie Roberts dumped her whole purse in the offering plate. In the coming Sundays, that became a regular occurrence. When Roberts died suddenly, her funeral was held at St. Margaret's, and (to the amazement of Roberts's family), some 200 from the parish attended. The congregation later created a memorial garden in her honor, including a stone inscribed with words from Isaiah 55.

Saint benedict's table was the local diocese's first effort at church planting since the era of the post-World War II religious boom. It received no funding from the diocese initially, just encouragement. Since its first official beginning in 2005, weekly worship has grown from about 40 to averaging between 170 and 180.

Saint ben's rents the facilities of All Saints Anglican Church, whose building is a delightful jumble of medieval stones with an ocean of dark wood inside. Not long before my visit, a tent city of homeless people set up camp on the church lawn. Winnipeg moved in not with police but with social services, getting lots of support from saint ben's and All Saints.

Preaching that challenges and liturgy that moves—both churches focus on these.

Besides their respectful disagreement on homosexuality, St. Margaret's and saint ben's also differ on the issue of open communion. At St. Margaret's, Widdicombe said he is trying to respect Anglicanism's teaching that communion should be

offered only to those baptized and confirmed. Howison, on the other hand, clearly remembers that saint ben's very first gathering of only nine people included one child who was baptized and one who was not. "We'd said we were going to gather around the eucharistic table," Howison recalled. "Am I not going to incorporate this child?"

Asked by a bishop to defend the church's open table, he responded with a short book, *Come to the Table*, describing people's experience at saint ben's of being drawn to the table and having that fellowship extend to other tables. Saint ben's vestry is called the Kitchen Table. "We always meet over meals," Howison tells me. "It changes things."

The community leaves out two enormous baskets at every Eucharist, inviting communicants to bring food to feed their neighbors. And the open table is a point of attraction in contrast to churches that fence their table. Parishioners tell me of a Moroccan Muslim who communes every week. Associate pastor Rachel Twigg Boyce sees the humor in the extensiveness of the welcome, remembering a man with a turban who showed up one Sunday: "the body of Christ, broken for you, person-in-a-turban . . ."

Jesus gathered people at meals, and saint ben's intends to do the same. Communicants gather in a circle around the altar, where each is given a piece of bread (the kind "you want to chew," as a lay leader told me) and a bowl of wine for a substantial draught—sacramental abundance in place of skimpiness. "There is no barrier between you and the table and God," said one leader, describing the church's theology.

Saint ben's punches above its weight musically. With his love for Coltrane, Howison has long been networked into Winnipeg's arts community, which puts on a world-class folk music festival every year. Early in saint ben's life, Howison invited his musician friends to be part of worship. Several fixtures in the Canadian folk music scene lead worship at the church and have recorded albums of saint ben's music. Anyone who listens to Alana Levandoski's "I Become What I Receive," or Gord Johnson's "Almighty God," or Steve Bell's version of the Sanctus—all conceived for the saint ben's liturgy—will find the music rambling around in their head for days.

Howison found his theological footing with help from the American Episcopal priest Robert Farrar Capon. Best known for his theological reflection on food as well as

books on the parables, Capon, who died in 2013, was also an emphatic exponent of the radical grace of God. Howison describes his mentor as an Anglo-Catholic for whom the forms of faith are available but not required: “You are free to do with these things as you are free to do without,” as Howison puts it.

At saint ben’s, 27 parishioners recently agreed to pray morning and evening prayer daily. A handful of parishioners told me eagerly of their pilgrimage to Mount Athos in Greece, the famous hub of Orthodox monasticism. Howison cites other influences, including Robert Webber’s “ancient-future” vision of faith, and a church plant in Minneapolis called “Spirit garage,” aimed at ever-elusive Gen X and millennials.

Saint ben’s started out trying to reach Gen X and found itself failing. But older people came, including lots of clergy. Saint ben’s has always met on Sunday evening, when people who are connected to other churches are able to attend, attracted by the liturgy, music, and preaching. “We have created value around being a second church,” Howison said.

Another important influence at saint ben’s is Taize, the Protestant monastic community in France. Howison was fascinated by Taize’s success in reaching youth in secular Europe—a sign that post-Christendom Europeans longed for silence, depth of prayer, and beauty. Saint ben’s music has the same haunting repetitive quality that marks Taize’s chant.

Saint ben’s liturgy acknowledges an element of faithful doubt not commonly found in contemporary music. The community often sings a song that describes a person approaching the communion table and thinking, “I *might* believe.” Howison summons worshipers to the table with an adapted version of the Iona liturgy, inviting those who “have much faith or little, have tried to follow, or are afraid you’ve failed.” He has a studied patience in his presiding style, and like a good cook he does not hurry.

These growing churches stress the ancient and mysterious aspects of the faith.

Both Howison and Widdicombe come from nonliturgical traditions, which may explain why they seem especially skilled at introducing people to liturgy and keeping it from becoming rote. Howison had long noticed the thing that fed his soul—a contemplative community—did not exist in his city. Not only does it exist now at saint ben’s, but the example is inspiring others.

People in both congregations acknowledge that they receive a steady stream of refugees from other churches, many of them coming from Mennonite churches. (A local joke goes like this: “What’s the fastest-growing Mennonite Church in Winnipeg?” Answer: “St. Margaret’s Anglican Church.”) Evangelicalism seems to create desires that, for many people, only liturgy and tradition can satisfy over the long haul. Excellent choral and congregational singing provides a bridge from the Mennonite world to the Anglican world.

Before getting to know these parishes on the prairie, I had hypothesized that they would feel very different from each other. It turns out that both focus on the ordinary things: preaching that challenges, liturgy that moves, community that generates friendships. Neither church is trying to be all things to all people. Both show that it’s possible to offer people something that is both ancient and new, and that is attractive.

“I often tell people that in my view, saint ben’s and St. Margaret’s are first cousins,” said Howison. “There’s so much resemblance and overlap in spite of the differences, and over the years we’ve had people shift from one community to the other with no sign of anything less than peaceableness. I love that.”

No one kind of ministry can stop the decline in mainline membership. The real question to ask is about what sort of church will be sturdy enough to survive the storm. St. Margaret’s and saint ben’s offer some clues.

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