

SIGNS OF LIFE

**NURTURING
SPIRITUAL GROWTH
IN YOUR CHURCH**

Expanded Second Edition

JAY SIDEBOTHAM

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022944186

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ISBN: 978-0-88028-531-5

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Expanded Second Edition, 2026



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JAY SIDEBOTHAM

FORWARD MOVEMENT
Cincinnati, Ohio

PRAISE FOR THE FIRST EDITION

“Everyone wants the secret to reversing church decline. There is no shortcut, but in *Signs of Life*, Jay Sidebotham lays out the clearest path you will find. The RenewalWorks team has spent a decade researching, testing, and guiding thousands of congregations, and I am so grateful that Sidebotham has now literally written the book on spiritual vitality and what it takes to ignite a fire for God in the heart of our churches.”

—The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers

Author of *Church Tomorrow?* and *The Church Cracked Open*

“*Signs of Life* is written by a pastor for any person, lay or ordained, who cares about congregations. Jay Sidebotham’s decades of experience in parish churches, as well as his vulnerable witness that developing ‘more programs’ is not the same as deepening faith in Jesus Christ, grounds this work and makes it both practical and beautiful.... This book affirms the truth that attending to tasks that hold up basic, common-sense, and faith-filled practices will strengthen a local church. The warmth of leaders (clergy and lay), getting people moving, embedding scripture in everything, empowering others, and caring for the entire local community are honest-to-goodness keys to the kingdom.”

—The Rt. Rev. Thomas James Brown

Bishop, Diocese of Maine

“Through stories, interviews, and insights from a lifelong passion to help people grow spiritually, Jay Sidebotham shares all that he’s learned about how to take intentional steps on the journey of faith and help others do the same. **RenewalWorks isn’t a program; it’s a pilgrimage.** It isn’t one thing to add to an already busy life and full church calendar; it points us in the direction of what matters most of all.”

—The Rt. Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

Bishop, Diocese of Washington

“Devoid of any time-bound and shallow gimmicks, this thin volume is actually an expansive atlas, a collection of maps that tells us both candidly where we are and how in hope to get where we want to go when we decide to be led by God to living together in Christ. **This book will renew Christ’s Body, the Church, for the sake of the world!**”

—The Rt. Rev. A. Robert Hirschfeld
Bishop, Diocese of New Hampshire

“*Signs of Life* is a **must-read for anyone in church leadership** within the Episcopal Church. Whether you are clergy, a professional lay minister, a vestry member, or serve as an usher one Sunday a month, this book will challenge and strengthen you and your ministry for the better.”

—Jerusalem Greer
Co-Executive Director, The Procter Center, Diocese of Southern Ohio

“For nearly a decade now, Jay Sidebotham has helped Episcopal parishes rediscover their first loves and grow in spiritual vitality. In *Signs of Life*, he distills the wisdom gained from that work into an accessible and inspiring single volume that **should be required reading for every vestry, search committee, priest, and Episcopal seminarian**. His relentless hope for the future of God’s church has inspired me in my own ministry, and the work of RenewalWorks has been transformative in the life of every parish I have served. I know it will continue to bear much fruit.”

—The Rev. Ryan Fleenor
Rector, St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Darien, Connecticut

“Whether read and discussed at the beginning of vestry meetings, read by a small group of congregational leadership, or alone, **this book is like going to an inspiring church conference, without the hassle of air travel and awkward nametags**. *Signs of Life* assumes that the life of God can be found within any congregation, if only we would open ourselves up to the transformation and renewal God’s life promises each one of us.

—*Earth & Altar*

CONTENTS

Foreword	xi
Introduction <i>Is Flat the New Up?</i>	1
1 <i>Archetypes of the Spiritual Journey</i>	13
2 <i>The Heart of the Leader</i>	33
3 <i>Get People Moving</i>	71
4 <i>Embed Scripture in Everything</i>	95
5 <i>Create Ownership</i>	121
6 <i>Pastor the Community</i>	143
Conclusion <i>Where Do We Go from Here?</i>	169
Notes & Supplements	175
Quick-Start Practices	193
Group Guide	201

SAMPLE

FOREWORD

TO THE SECOND EDITION

The enduring appeal of *Signs of Life* rests in its simple but profound claim: that the Christian journey is not an abstract set of ideas, but a way of life formed in the pattern of Jesus. In the years since its first publication, this insight has only grown more urgent. Across the Episcopal Church, we are waking up to a truth that threads through every parish story, whether one of flourishing or of struggle: The deepest challenges we face—financial strain, congregational conflict, declining engagement, or uncertainty about our mission—are, at heart, discipleship questions.

The great joy of Christian living is equally true: At the heart of a life well lived and a hope well placed is also discipleship. Following Jesus with deeper and deeper fidelity is not simply an option or a choice amongst choices, nor a distraction amidst distractions—it's the whole ball game for the Christian and for the Church.

We often look for technical solutions to what are ultimately spiritual problems. We reorganize committees, re-balance budgets, and revise strategic plans. Yet again and again the evidence points to a more foundational issue.

Through the work of RenewalWorks, we now have a growing body of data on the spiritual health of the Episcopal Church. These findings are

both sobering and hopeful. They reveal that many Episcopalians have a genuine love for the Church and a desire for spiritual depth, yet also that a significant portion of our members are not actively engaged in the basic practices that sustain and mature Christian faith: regular prayer, scripture reflection, sacrificial giving, service, and intentional community. The result is congregational life that can feel thin, fragile, or reactive, even when our worship remains beautiful.

This was my own experience when my congregations took part in RenewalWorks and embarked on journeys of deeper discipleship. From our youngest members to our oldest, and from our newest seekers to our long-time folks, too, there was a deep desire for something more. In a culture where our most practiced form of seeking is scrolling on a screen, our very being is shouting that we are called for more than this—for more than we see and for more than we can ask or imagine.

But the RenewalWorks research also testifies to something else: When individuals take even a few steps toward deeper discipleship, the entire culture of a congregation changes. Spiritual vitality grows. Hope increases. Conflict softens. Generosity expands. Vision returns.

This should not surprise us. Jesus has always called disciples, not consumers. He invites followers, not observers. Every time a Christian answers that invitation with greater intention, the Body of Christ becomes stronger.

The second edition of *Signs of Life* emerges at a time when the Episcopal Church needs this clarity more than ever. It reminds us—gently but unmistakably—that discipleship is not a program or a specialty; it is the Christian life itself. And it is a life that makes demands.

If our congregations are to thrive, if our communities are to be places of healing and courage, then we must raise the expectations we set for ourselves and for those who join us. This is not about imposing burdens but about reclaiming joy. Christian maturity is not a privilege for a spiritual elite—it is the gift and calling of every baptized person.

To follow Jesus more faithfully is to risk our comfort, to stretch our habits, to open our lives to transformation. It asks us to move from passive belonging to active seeking, from preference to purpose, from maintenance to mission.

And it requires leaders—lay and ordained—to model and cultivate this shift with humility, imagination, and hope.

My prayer is that this new edition will serve as a companion for that work. May it help us remember that the Church's health is inseparable from the spiritual lives of its members. May it inspire us to nurture practices that deepen trust in God. May it embolden us to hold one another to a higher standard—not out of judgment, but out of love for the one who calls us into abundant life. And may it move us, step by step, toward communities where discipleship is not assumed, but expected; not an option, but our shared way of being faithfully one in Christ.

The future of the Episcopal Church depends on nothing more, and Jesus prays for nothing less.

—**The Rev. Robert Hendrickson**
Chief of Discipleship Initiatives, Forward Movement

SAMPLE

INTRODUCTION

IS FLAT THE NEW UP?

About two dozen rectors gathered for an annual clergy retreat, a gathering that was to last for several days. Most of that time would be facilitated by a guest presenter, but the time always began by going around the circle. Each church leader talked about what had been going on in their congregation over the past year. Along with successes, the leaders described challenges facing their congregations. These were often referred to as “war stories.” In recent years, the war stories included declining attendance, challenging budgets, clergy and staff running on fumes, cranky parishioners, battles with vestries, and so on. Church is not for the faint of heart. In the circle, several leaders boasted about the ways that they weren’t doing worse than last year. After a few of those accounts, members of the group began to wonder: *Is flat the new up?*

That’s not a new question. We read in the New Testament, in the first chapters of the book of Revelation, about the church in Laodicea, which is described as lukewarm. Over the generations, the church has found itself in the doldrums, in need of renewed vitality. In the last century, that was where the Episcopal Church found itself, leading to the founding of Forward Movement. The ministry of Forward Movement began in the 1930s at a time of challenge and decline, not only in the church but also in the wider culture as well. The spirit of the Great Depression had spilled over into the church, and leaders were struggling to maintain the institution. During a discussion at the General Convention of the

Episcopal Church, someone rose and said: “We have to hold the line!” To which someone else responded: “We don’t need to hold the line. We need to move forward.” Out of that conversation, the ministry of Forward Movement was launched, based on the premise and promise that the church *would* move forward with a focus on spiritual practices. Specifically, revitalization would come with reading and reflecting on scripture, bolstered by a deepened prayer life, led by persons committed to discipleship. It was a vision of the spiritual journey unfolding not only on Sunday mornings but throughout the week. The story of the genesis of Forward Movement prompts us to consider what might be the forward movement for the church these days. *Do we see any signs of life?*

Welcome, then, to a discussion of how the church might *move forward*, with clear-eyed consideration of the various challenges facing congregations, as well as a celebration of those practices that contribute to spiritual vitality in congregations. We call these best practice principles “signs of life.” The concepts and the stories presented in this book emerge from a ministry called RenewalWorks. RenewalWorks is a concerted effort to make spiritual growth the priority in Episcopal congregations and to build cultures of discipleship in those congregations. This book is intended to offer an honest assessment of the current state of the church and, at the same time, highlight signs that give us hope for the days ahead. The book is written free from illusion that there is any quick fix. Nor do we propose a prescriptive focus on programmatic solutions. Renewal in the life of the church requires a *culture change* in many cases, and that kind of change does not happen overnight. What you have in this book is simply hopeful confidence that it can happen. After all, with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).

This ministry of RenewalWorks began outside the Episcopal Church, at a large nondenominational church in suburban Chicago. Willow Creek Community Church was, by all measures, a model of success for congregational life. The parking lot was so big you could lose your car, so numbers were placed on light posts to help people remember where they parked. Few Episcopal churches face that challenge. But

amid all the apparent success, senior leadership at Willow Creek came to realize that while they had been successful in welcoming newcomers in a seeker-friendly environment, they were not sure that people were actually *growing* in their spirituality. Their spiritual *hunger* was not necessarily being addressed. Many active members were dissatisfied and looking to other communities for spiritual *renewal*. This led the leadership to engage a market researcher to find out what was going on in the hearts of parishioners. Where were these people on their own spiritual journeys? What moved them? What shaped their religious practice? What stood in the way of spiritual growth? The church created an online inventory to give an accurate picture of where people in the congregation were in their spiritual journey. Out of the data gathered, they identified several best practice principles for vital congregations. But would that kind of learning apply to Episcopal congregations?

STARTING THE WORK OF RENEWAL

As rector of an Episcopal church north of Chicago, I got wind of the research emerging from Willow Creek, beginning with the learning that vital congregations are ones that are deeply engaged with scripture. Based on that research, our parish began a yearlong process of reading scripture. From September to May, we made a commitment to read the Bible, front to back. Our education programs for adults and children focused on a passage of the week. Many in our congregation were reading scripture for the first time in a long time. Many had no idea of the trajectory of scripture. Did Abraham come before Moses? Where did David and Isaiah and Daniel and Jeremiah fit in the picture? There was indeed a sense of renewed spiritual interest in the parish, based on this experience of biblical exploration. People loved it.

With that initial success behind us, I decided to go deeper in exploration of this process from Willow Creek, offering the online inventory and subsequent workshops that served as a discernment tool. I came to think

of it as spiritual strategic planning. We learned a lot about where members of our parish were in their spiritual journey. We got some clear ideas of where we would like to go.

In some respects, it was a bumpy start. The language from this more evangelical church was strange and, in some cases, offensive to our Anglican congregants. That led us to begin a process of translation and adaptation to make the material more Episcopal/Anglican-friendly. The process included material that inquired into the meaning of the sacraments, as we discovered there was great hunger for deeper understanding of the meaning of Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist.

The process led to a new level of engagement with questions of spiritual growth in the parish. Some people resisted that kind of focus. Others embraced it. Neighboring congregations began to express interest. A group of congregations in the diocese took on the work. Churches around the country heard about it. I began to get invitations to lead presentations, which spoke to me of the spiritual hunger in Episcopal congregations. That hunger seemed to be an important sign of life, a desire for more, even if the roadmap was uncertain. Indeed, our research has since shown that Episcopalians have a deep hunger for spiritual growth, though folks are not always sure how to go about addressing that desire. Clergy don't always know how to address that need either. It became clear that there was a need to focus more intentionally on what this process had to offer. I was not able to do that and continue to run a church at the same time. So, I resigned my position as rector and launched a ministry in partnership with Forward Movement called RenewalWorks, which began on July 1, 2013.

The ministry of RenewalWorks seeks to help congregations (and their leaders) know where congregants are in their spiritual journeys. Based on the data gathered through spiritual inventories, leaders and congregants can chart a course forward. The process has revealed that Episcopalians come to church for all kinds of reasons. Some come simply because it's what they have always done or because it is what their family has always done. Some come for the music. Others come for a sense of community,

to be with people who have become friends and companions on the journey. Some come to savor the beauty of a particular building; others to be involved in a particular outreach ministry. All of these are good reasons for coming to church. But our work embraces a lofty yet vital aspiration: *the primary reason for coming to church is spiritual growth*, by which we mean growth in love of God and love of neighbor. All other reasons (music, fellowship, service) grow out of that commitment to spiritual growth.

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STAGES ALONG THE WAY

That pathway of spiritual growth is represented in RenewalWorks's research through a spiritual continuum, a linear depiction of the spiritual life describing four distinct stages. Based on how people respond to the initial inventory (or survey), describing their own spiritual state, they are placed in one of four categories.

Exploring

At the time of publication, eighteen percent of Episcopalians surveyed identify themselves within the first stage of spiritual growth—*exploring*. This is a particularly interesting insight given the fact that many respondents also indicate they have been attending the church longer than ten years. People in this first stage are exploring the basic beliefs expressed in the Episcopal tradition. They are drawn to the beauty of the liturgy, particularly Holy Eucharist. At the same time, they are eager for

a deeper understanding of the sacraments and for help from the church in that regard. They affirm belief in God, though they are not sure what faith claims they would make about Christ. Generally speaking, faith is not a significant part of their life on a day-to-day basis.

Growing

The majority surveyed (fifty-three percent) identify themselves within the second stage of spiritual growth—*growing*. They are committed to the Christian faith, but they still have many questions and would not speak of having a personal relationship with God in Christ. People in the first two stages of the continuum are highly dependent on the church, especially the clergy, to help them grow in faith. Such growth requires development of a relationship with God in Christ—and this can be tricky for Episcopalians, who don't always identify with language of a personal relationship with God. An authentic vision of this relationship can often be accomplished by exploration of personal spiritual practices during the week, when people are not in church. Such practices may include prayer, time in solitude, and reflection on scripture.

Deepening

Twenty-four percent of parishioners identify themselves within the third stage of spiritual growth—*deepening* their relationship with God in Christ. They describe having a personal relationship with God, and they are moving toward a place where they value that personal relationship with God even more than their particular church membership. They feel close to Christ and depend on him daily for guidance. One person described this stage as a person driving a car with God in the passenger seat, always assisting in life's navigation. For this group, opportunities to have spiritual friendships, mentors, or small-group connections are especially important, as these provide mutual accountability and moral/spiritual support.

Centered

Five percent of the respondents identify themselves within the fourth stage of spiritual growth—that of being *centered*. Of course, by no means does

this stage's rank imply that the spiritual journey is over or that this group cannot enjoy further growth. But for this small percentage, a personal relationship with God in Christ is the most important relationship in their lives. Picking up the automotive analogy again, in this case, God is driving the car, and the person at this stage is in the passenger seat.

CATALYSTS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

The point of this continuum is to express the aspiration that people will move deeper in their own faith, that they will experience real spiritual growth, which we define as growth in love of God and love of neighbor. This linear model for spiritual growth may not *fully* explain the miracle of deepening a life with God. There are other models out there that address different aspects of the mystery of growth. But this continuum can be helpful, particularly as we focus on the movement in the continuum. The movement from one stage to the next is supported by beliefs or practices that serve as impetus for deeper engagement in life with God. Based on our research, four catalysts, in particular, make a difference.

Engagement with scripture

At every stage along the continuum, engagement with scripture is transformative. When Episcopal congregations go through the RenewalWorks process, one of the most common responses is for congregations to find a way to engage with scripture as a community.

Transforming power of the eucharist

For Episcopalians, especially for those beginning an intentional spiritual journey with God in Christ, participation in the eucharist is key. The more that churches can help people grow in understanding this mysterious sacrament, the further people move along the spiritual continuum.