St. Paul's Episcopal Church

Grinnell, Iowa



Introduction

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Grinnell, Iowa, is a small, dynamic, joyful parish community encompassing every generation among its members. It takes a traditional approach to worship and spiritual life and a progressive approach to social justice and belonging, with an open and affirming commitment to identity, inclusion, ministry, and caregiving in our congregation and our community.

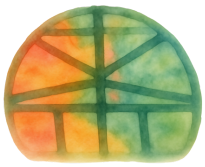
The church's mission statement, adopted twenty years ago, consistently has held true:

The people of St. Paul's aspire to grow in knowledge and love of Christ through prayer, worship, education, ministry, and service to the world and the local community, the adjacent college campus, and each other. We are open and affirming, and we welcome all people to join the life and ministry of our congregation.

These core values were affirmed by the parish survey conducted in April-May 2026, which revealed that we are a strong, healthy parish with very good vital signs. Survey results showed that we gave ourselves particularly high marks in lay engagement and empowerment; change readiness; worship; spiritual life; formation, education, and training; outreach; and leadership and organization. A consistent emphasis in respondents' narrative reflections was the wide and deep love of this church family, stressing especially a value of multigenerational relationships and the contagious joy the entire congregation finds in the presence of our younger members.

We see our small size as an asset, even as we stay on the lookout for opportunities to grow and learn. The wardens have historically had strong working relationships with the rector, and service in governance roles like vestry regularly rotates among individuals and families and includes representation of longtime parishioners, relative newcomers, college students, and everyone in between. We try to be mindful of people's time, talents, and energies to avoid overtaxing those gifts while staying open to new sources of ideas and energy. Sometimes this openness means a willingness to try new approaches, and other times a willingness to admit when something isn't working or needs a pause, or when even a well-established program calls for reassessment or sunsetting. These considerations always have the potential to yield

diverging opinions, but the church has also developed productive strategies for consulting widely--and praying deeply--to illuminate the way forward.



Setting

The parish is very active in the Diocese of Iowa, which is a vibrant and healthy diocese within Province VI of the Episcopal Church USA: https://www.iowaepiscopal.org/. St. Paul's is represented in diocesan ministries and governance in a number of ways, including a lobbying presence at the state capital, a local team of Episco-PRIDE (a diocesan program that has modeled LGBTQIA+ inclusion for the national church), youth participation in statewide gatherings, lay and clergy membership on committees like the Commission on Ministry, and regular delegations to convention. A recent comparison of peer churches in the state revealed that St. Paul's is in a unique bracket as a rural parish with resources on par with churches in metro areas.

St. Paul's is located adjacent to the Grinnell College campus and one block from downtown Grinnell. The parish has a strong connection to the college through its members, which include college students, faculty, staff, alums, and families; as a result, the values of a liberal arts education and the rhythms of the academic year structure our church life as well. The clergy have an important role to play in cultivating and maintaining those relationships, in partnership with college chaplains and with leadership in the wider community.

The City of Grinnell is a vibrant place to live and work. Dubbed "Jewel of the Prairie" after Louis Sullivan's 1914 "jewel box" bank structure that adorns the corner of 4th and Broad, Grinnell offers a quality of civic and commercial life that eludes many small towns in the rural Midwest. Storefronts in the downtown historic district are full of independent restaurants, pubs, coffeeshops, boutiques, thrift stores, a bookstore, a bike store, a 3-screen cinema, a community arts building, a makerspace, a state-of-the-art public library, a post office, and several banks, law practices, and financial advisory firms. The Grinnell Area Arts Council, Grinnell School of Music, and Grinnell Historical Museum are grassroots nonprofits that curate public arts and heritage. The public school district has one high school, one middle school and two elementary schools. The elementary schools will be replaced by a new, larger state-of-the-art elementary school which is currently under construction and slated to open in 2028. There is also a large early learning center and several preschools.

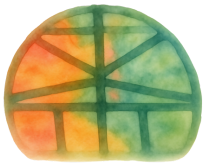
The town's labor market benefits from three large local employers: Grinnell College, Grinnell Mutual Reinsurance Company, and Grinnell Regional Medical Center (a Unity Point Health hospital and outpatient complex that includes departments of emergency and urgent care,

primary care and family medicine, internal medicine, OB-GYN, radiology, rehabilitation, and hospice, among many others). At the same time, Grinnell encompasses a wide socio-economic landscape and its residents rely on community-supported services, particularly through MICA (Mid-Iowa Community Action). Although it is not the county seat, at roughly 9,400 residents, Grinnell is the most populous town in Poweshiek County and in many ways its center of gravity.

Just out of town and over the border in Jasper County there are a variety of public conservation areas, including Krumm Nature Preserve and the Uhlenhopp Arboretum. The city also supports extensive green spaces, parks, and recreation offerings within the city limits: https://www.grinnelliowa.gov/159/Parks-Recreation In the summer months, Central Park hosts live music and a farmer's market, and a community-supported agriculture collective (Grinnell Farm-to-Table) sells locally-raised products year round. Grinnell College and the City of Grinnell have a strong partnership and offer one another's residents numerous benefits and amenities. Art exhibits, cultural performances, visiting lectures, and sporting events on campus are free and open to the public, and community members may use the athletic facilities for a small fee.

For more information, see the Chamber of Commerce's and Grinnell College's websites, calendars, and social media feeds:

- https://www.grinnellchamber.org/
- www.grinnell.edu



History

St. Paul's Episcopal Church was established in 1872 with nine families. In 1885, a small frame edifice to house the church was erected at First Avenue and Main Street in Grinnell. The church faced challenges in 1890, when it had to rely on visiting clergy and shared ministries due to an empty pulpit. The Episcopal Diocese of Iowa re-established the mission in 1949. Services were held on the first floor of a house at Park Street and Eighth Avenue. The space was named St. Dunstan's, reflecting its connection to the patron saint of learning. During this period, the congregation was yoked with St. Stephen's in Newton.

In 1954, a new building was constructed at Sixth Avenue and State Street. This site, originally intended for a Grinnell College botanical garden, became St. Paul's home for decades. This structure, now referred to as St. Dunstan's, was originally planned as Phase 1 of a two-phase

project, with a sanctuary addition as Phase 2. This plan was never realized due to funding limitations.

But a significant turning point came in 1994 when the idea arose that we could relocate a historic church building to our site to serve as the sanctuary we had been desiring. The impending closure of the nearby 130-year-old Chester Church sparked a “recycling project.” Funded by congregation pledges, outside gifts, and a diocesan loan, this $220,000 project aimed to preserve the past and prepare for the future. In 1995, St. Paul’s Vicar informed the Chester congregation of St. Paul’s unanimous decision to move the church to Grinnell, a sentiment echoed by the Chester congregation’s unanimous vote to donate their building.

The arrival of the Chester Church in Grinnell was a celebrated event, culminating in members of both congregations and community volunteers pushing the church onto its foundation: https://stpaulsgrinnell.weebly.com/video-of-our-cool-history.html. No other mechanical means were used for this final step of the relocation, only the power of human hands, a testament to communal effort. Following restoration of the new sanctuary, the addition of a connecting link to the original building, and the installation of the bell tower, St. Paul’s dedicated its new worship space in 1997. This addition fulfilled the original vision for a Phase 2 expansion. The official dedication on April 20, 1997 was led by Bishop Christopher Epting of Iowa, assisted by the interim pastor.

Throughout its history, St. Paul’s has benefited from strong leadership. The church remained partnered with Newton until 1960, when it became an independent mission and student chaplaincy for Grinnell College, enabling it to hire its own priest. St. Paul’s moved from mission status in 2006 when it became a parish. The 1960s and 70s were marked by stable leadership. The 1980s saw growth under a dynamic priest, while the 1990s and early 2000s presented leadership challenges that the congregation successfully navigated, emerging stronger. Since 2013, the church has thrived under the leadership of its beloved rector, recognized locally as a spiritual guide and advocate for social justice, interfaith work, and community engagement.



Worship & Spirituality



We celebrate Holy Eucharist at St. Paul's every Sunday at 10:30 a.m. using Rite II in the Book of Common Prayer. The order of service is printed in color on a folded 8 1/2 x 11" sheet of paper that our outgoing Rector prepares. This bulletin typically contains an insert outlining ongoing or upcoming church activities. The service is preceded by a Bible study of about an hour led by the Rector and it concludes with a coffee hour with refreshments provided by parishioners. Our average Sunday attendance, currently reported as 41, makes the sanctuary feel full every week and all year.

The service and service music change in nature with the church seasons. This includes rotating Eucharistic Prayers, including a special Eucharistic prayer written by a former parishioner, now an Episcopal priest, that celebrates our prairie roots (also approved for diocesan use). We have an organist who plays between three and six selections from the 1982 Hymnal as well as contemporary songs of praise from *Lift Every Voice and Sing* and a folk songbook. We also have an electronic piano that our organist plays and she typically frames

the service with a prelude and a closing piece of her selection. On occasions when our organist is away, a local string and percussion band, composed of several church members, plays in her absence. This summer we are also hosting an intern, an organ student from the college, who wishes to get more experience in liturgical accompaniment. We do not currently have a dedicated choir, although one is often mustered on special occasions, drawing on a variety of musical connections within and beyond the congregation. Recently we have revived the practice of offering a service of Lessons and Carols one Sunday in Advent, either as a separate service or incorporated into the Liturgy of the Word in the morning Eucharist. Music has always been a significant part of St. Paul's services, as we have been blessed with strong ties over the years to Grinnell College's music department.

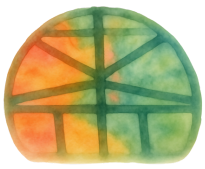


On a typical Sunday there will be between two and three people on the altar: the Priest/Rector, an Acolyte, and a Crucifer. We have a Verger who often serves both these supporting roles and sets up the altar for the service. A ROTA of parishioners is drawn up twice a year by the Verger to assign service roles: readers of the Old Testament Lesson and the Epistle; a cantor for the Psalm of the day, who leads the congregational chant; an Intercessor; and two Eucharistic Ministers who present wine for both intinction and for sipping from the common cup. Laying on of hands is offered during the Eucharist one Sunday each month. Our current rector is a powerful and popular preacher who tends to use an extemporaneous format; other styles are welcome, and the congregation recognizes that strong preaching has many faces and voices. When the Priest is absent, a member of the parish leads the congregation in Morning Prayer, with supporting roles delegated to other parishioners. The sanctuary is also offered for occasional services such as Taizé, Noonday prayer, and Compline. During COVID, when we were not able to worship in person, parishioners provided a daily Compline service in addition to the weekly service our Rector hosted from the sanctuary via Zoom.

Other regular services include “Pizza Church,“ a family-oriented service offered one Sunday evening each month that the parish’s children lead, and which is followed by a pizza dinner in the St. Dunstan’s common room. Our current Rector also provides a service one Wednesday each month at the Mayflower senior living community in Grinnell, which has grown to as many as 20 regular attendees. Other local churches participate in this ministry as well.



The church yard maintains a Resurrection Garden for interment of parishioners as well as a separate Memorial Garden for beloved pets.



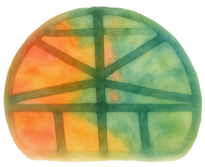
Children & Youth

St. Paul’s is blessed with a vibrant and enthusiastic contingent of children and youth. The congregation is very intentional about creating a welcoming and inclusive space for them, recognizing that children are one of a congregation’s great gifts. During the service, childcare is provided, but children are also welcome to go between the service and the nursery as they wish and as their parents find appropriate. As they grow, kids are invited to take on roles within the service, including serving as acolytes, ushers, readers and musicians. Older kids and teens take on the role of providing care for the younger ones as well.

St. Paul's does a wonderful job of offering age-appropriate, fun faith formation opportunities for its children and youth. Formation activities are part of the Sunday service and nearly every parish party/gathering has a special emphasis on activities for kids. These events include Mardi Gras, Easter Sunday, Halloween and Christmas gatherings among others.



A children's sermon is regularly offered on Sundays, which is as appreciated by the adults as by the kids! Sunday school follows after the children's sermon and is taught by volunteers from the congregation. Classes about the Episcopal church are offered annually and kids considered to be at an appropriate point in their faith journey are invited to take part so they can be confirmed, if they wish. Open to anyone in the congregation to attend, Pizza Church, a shortened, child-friendly service followed by pizza dinner, allows kids to participate in nearly every aspect of the service – from lighting the candles to serving Communion, and is a favorite with many of the kids and families. Youth group is another great opportunity for older kids to experience community, fun and fellowship while also deepening their faith. Youth group gatherings take place monthly and include activities such as meals together, going to the movies, going bowling and more. The youngsters at St. Paul's also take advantage of the diocesan youth activities.

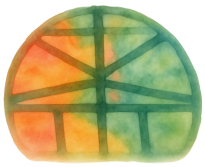


Social Life



St. Paul's has an intimate yet expansive and exuberant communal vibe. Coffee hour after Sunday service is a thing of beauty: not a drive-by greeting on the way out but a sit-down affair where you'll find friends of all ages checking in on each other after a hard week or reconnecting after time away. Special celebrations turn coffee hours into even more elaborate spreads to honor feast days, baptisms, confirmations, and graduating seniors. Advent white-elephant gift exchanges and Halloween parties are beloved traditions. The men of the church have organized retreats at local state parks and Tuesday mornings the Wise Women of St Paul's get together for socializing, support, and much laughter.

The collective sense of humor and spirit of fun extends in all directions, including movie trips to the local Strand Cinema or megaplex in Altoona, trips to see the Iowa Wild hockey and the I-Cubs minor league in Des Moines, and teenage ski weekends near Ames with other youth from across the diocese. College student church members bring their friends to monthly meals out with the rector. Parishioners therefore not only enjoy each other's company, but also use these opportunities to extend a spirit of welcome and belonging to folks beyond core Sunday attendants. Sunday worship itself has an important social dimension–as shown by our warm, extended, and mobile approach to passing the peace!



Community Connections & Outreach

We believe in serving the needs of others in our community, the Grinnell College campus, and with programs that promote social and environmental justice, and our members provide this support in a variety of ways. Our history of outreach and engagement has been an integral part of our church for many years. Below is a list of some of the ways we have supported the needs in our community and diocese currently and in the past:



- Our congregation:
  - Bible reflection
  - Coffee hours
  - Spiritual retreats
  - Wise Women
- The use of the church building for the following:
  - Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon meetings
  - SEG (Social Entrepreneurs of Grinnell) fundraising events
  - Rehearsals for Schultz and Company (a local singing group) and for Turlach Ur pipe and drum group
  - Providing meals for RAGBRAI riders
  - Yoga classes
  - Vox Feminae music concerts
  - Spiritual retreats
- Outreach in our Grinnell community
  - Meals on Wheels
  - Community meals
  - Christmas Shares providing gifts at Christmas for individuals and families in need
  - Pill bottle ministry for reuse/recycling of pill containers
  - Supporting Second Mile, a thrift store whose proceeds help families and organizations in our county. A former rector co-founded this organization.

- Supporting Mid-Iowa Community Action (MICA), a non-profit that supports families in Poweshiek and surrounding counties, with donations for the food pantry and providing money for milk vouchers
- Combined services with other churches in Grinnell
- Support for local PFLAG chapter
- Former members were instrumental in the founding of the Grinnell Community Daycare Center, which continues as the Grinnell Community Early Learning Center.
- Clergy participation in the Grinnell Ministerial Association, which meets regularly and, among other activities, sponsors an annual picnic.
- Collection for Rector's Discretionary Fund (used to assist individuals and families in the community in immediate need of food, utilities, and other basic services)



- Outreach to Grinnell College
  - Providing care packages for students during finals
  - For decades, St. Paul's offered Happy Birthdays Unlimited, via which college parents could place orders for cakes and brownies to be delivered to their child
  - Monthly dinners with college students at local restaurants
  - Hosting students' visiting families
- Diocese of Iowa and the national church
  - National and global support for areas that have had disasters or other needs through Episcopal Relief & Development and Good Friday offering
  - Active support of the Diocese of Iowa through attendance at the annual Diocesan Convention and service on committees
  - Hosting discernment committees for those considering calls to diaconate and priesthood; sponsoring seminarians
- Environmental justice and care of creation
  - Prairie cultivation in church yard
  - Carbon awareness of buildings, grounds, and facilities

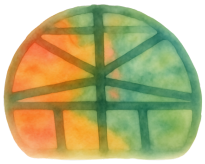
College Connections & Outreach

St. Paul's as a church has always been very connected to Grinnell College by virtue of being in the same small town, as well as being located across the street from the campus. However, with various priests this connection has grown through outreach via attending the Listening Project (a Grinnell College student-led community outreach project), engaging with the Grinnell College chaplain, and fostering a welcoming environment for college students to attend services. Students also serve in governance roles; at least one place on vestry is reserved for student representation and the current vestry has two students serving. St. Paul's also has an endowment from the diocese for supporting campus engagement. It is St. Paul's hope that going into the future our priest can broaden their relationship with the college by exploring social media presence for St. Paul's as well as continuing to attend college events and being in communication with the chaplain.



A group of five college students who regularly attend services at St. Paul's were given the diocesan list of essential ministry skills. Their selected skills have a lot of overlap with skills that the rest of St. Paul's congregation values. Some of these skills include academic/theological knowledge, campus ministry, diversity, equity & inclusion, and LGBTQIA+ ministries. These show that our college students care about and want a future priest to be able to address issues that affect us and our community. Additionally, many college students interviewed expressed a desire for the new priest not just to preach the gospel but

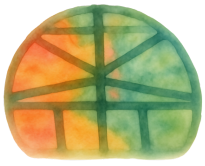
also to be able to relate its lessons to daily life and help college students live out the scripture. Because of St. Paul's unique location in a college town, it will be important for the next priest to approach the Bible readings through an academic as well as spiritual lens and have the ability to connect with college students.



Budget & Finances

The main staff supported by the church is the rector or priest-in-charge, which is a ¾ position. Current and past clergy have found it a benefit to have summers off to use for travel, family time, spiritual retreat, continuing education, clergy exchanges, supply opportunities in seasonal communities, and to meet other needs of rest, restoration, and wellness in a flexible manner. We also have a paid organist for Sunday accompaniment, a part-time bookkeeper, two childcare providers for Sunday services and a weekly cleaning service. There is currently no paid administrative assistant, but we have employed administrators in the past; those duties could be further restructured under future staffing arrangements.

Our finances are healthy but stewardship is also an ongoing growth area. We currently have 31 pledging units, and in FY2025 our annual budget was $164,829. This includes the Morgan Bequest, an endowed fund earmarked for campus outreach which the church also may draw on for related operating expenses. St. Paul's budget relies on the Morgan Bequest to support campus ministry with Grinnell College students, understood as the full range of our shared life with them—including Sunday worship, coffee hour, monthly meals, and annual parish activities—while church leadership remains committed to safeguarding the endowment for future mission and ministry. Capital campaigns for dedicated projects, most vividly demonstrated by the recent expansion and refurbishment of our community space and sanctuary, have been very successful. The parish survey revealed stewardship as an area of moderate vitality, and while parishioners have not identified fundraising as an essential quality of the next priest's leadership skills, they are also mindful that effective stewardship takes commitment to cultivating time, talent and treasure, and thoughtful engagement with every level of giving.



Conclusion

Change is never easy, and as a parish we are looking ahead to welcoming a new phase of ministry while honoring the past contributions of a beloved rector who is moving into retirement. We take courage in that process by trusting in the Spirit to carry that collective work forward, and by drawing on our established strengths as a community:

- an institutional culture of shared governance and consensus building
- a financial culture of healthy stewardship
- a pastoral culture of mutual care and compassion
- a social culture of inclusion and enjoyment of one another's diverse personalities and gifts
- a liturgical culture that values the beauty of music, scripture, and sacraments
- an intellectual culture that values critical inquiry and open-minded discernment

Our congregation seeks a priest who will both lead us and walk beside us as people of faith and action. We particularly welcome candidates whose gifts include appreciative inquiry; congregational development; collaborative, adaptive leadership and service; pastoral care; campus and community outreach; social justice; education and formation; liturgical, theological, and spiritual direction; and commitment to inclusion and belonging. All interested candidates should send a cover letter, resume, and Vocation Hub Portfolio to the Rev. Canon Meg Wagner, mwagner@iowaepiscopal.org.

Though we are many, we are one body, and we look forward to seeing who is called to celebrate and share with us in that one bread.

