



American International Church

Listening Groups 2024

What do you value about AIC and its part in your life?

Why does that matter to you personally,
in your life's story?

During the autumn of 2024, the Council supported Pastors Jared and Jennifer to organize and lead a series of Listening Groups. These groups were designed to help people deepen their connections with one another at AIC, as well as providing insight into what people value about our church.

Across eight groups, we had 41 people participate. They represented people from many aspects of AIC's ministries, including those who do not attend Sunday services. Youth and older adults, newcomers and long-timers, and people from many kinds of backgrounds took part.

Each group followed the same process, and each individual shared responses to the above two questions, across two rounds. The stories and comments shared follow "Chatham House Rules," where there is permission to disclose, but without attribution or identification of individuals who spoke those words.

These stories reveal the profound impact that AIC has in the lives of individuals who participate. We hope this insight will guide our priorities and decisions as a congregation in the future.

Key Story

We came to London and attended a church down Caledonian Road, and noticed we were the only black people there. As we left, they said, “Don’t ever come back, because your presence would keep our white members from coming.” We worked hard to hold on to faith after that experience, and to continue to love people even though love wasn’t received from church. Then we came to AIC, and once sat next to the US Ambassador. We weren’t treated any differently than he was, not better or worse. Everyone is treated like an equal and ordinary person at AIC. Our welcome isn’t abstract.

Pastoral Perspective

Every church thinks it’s friendly. These comments show that the welcome at AIC is a lived reality, experienced by those who attend. The welcome statement we adopted in 2022 has become more than a theological or political claim. It has become what we aspire to be in our interactions with one another at AIC. The feeling of warmth and welcome is palpable because we undertake it with effort and intentionality.

—Pastor Jennifer

In Your Words

I was drawn by AIC’s **inclusion** and emphasis on progressive values. I had always been told that progressive values did not equal Christian values, but learned otherwise. I’m finally understanding that people committed to faith share values of inclusion, after I had been confused for a long time.

You as an individual are **valued and accepted**. You can do what calls out to you, but you are not scolded for what you do or do not do.

AIC is a comforting place to be that’s **open to everyone**. Everyone is important here.

I always felt there was something wrong with me, and I didn’t fit in. Coming to church overrides a deep feeling of being flawed or damaged.

AIC is known as a church who **ministers to everyone**, and I have invited a friend to engage with AIC because of our social action.

I visited other churches where nobody welcomed me. I think shaking hands is a metaphor for a deeper attitude of welcome. When I first visited AIC, **someone immediately introduced themselves**.

It is freeing **not to be judged**. There is no targeting or competition. I can sit here broken, joyous, curious, and that is valid enough.

Welcome and Acceptance

In Your Words

I appreciate the simplicity of AIC. We welcome everyone, we focus on the **foundational aspects of being Christian**. I want to be a part of a church where **loving Jesus is at the core**.

There is a **thoughtfulness** and a bespoke nature to worship and services. There's a **creative energy** to the activities in the building and involvement in the community.

I have a Sunday School faith. It's **just God, all about God**, whether formal or informal. My faith is simple and without question. The lack of question isn't smug and self-satisfied, it's just my faith.

What do I get out of AIC that I don't get anywhere else? **God cares**. I believe Jesus was who he said he was. AIC gives me a chance to **study the scripture** with other people who take it seriously, including people not like me.

Faith never felt natural to me, but **I believe and finally found language for it**. I also value the service side of things. Even if I can't always do it, I feel the power of it through the church.

Sermons at AIC always have intriguing ideas that continue past Sunday, and I speak about the ideas with people at work. And I hum the songs from worship throughout the week!

Lyrics to songs are not vapid. They **mean something** even if simple.

Key Story

I walked by AIC and found out about Bible Study. I was looking for an online Bible study from a different perspective. I came and liked that it is still serious Christianity in some way. Some progressives don't really look like Christianity and it's vaguely about love, but we are reading the Bible. While abroad, this has been my only church engagement and it's been a lifeline.

Pastoral Perspective

Community, service to others, beautiful music and activism can be found in many non-religious organisations—including many who will do those things better than AIC ever could. What we do that no one else does is put God in the centre. We practice the faith of Jesus Christ, take seriously God's work in the world, engage with the scriptures and give rigorous attention to what it means to be a Christian. While it's gratifying to hear appreciation for the quality of our preaching and music, what I hear more profoundly is a gratitude for engaging with weighty matters of the heart and Spirit. We should not hesitate to speak boldly about AIC as a Christian community, boldly open-minded and welcoming in Jesus' name.

—Pastor Jennifer

Taking God Seriously

Key Story

I normally follow the rules. As an obedient person born into a religious family, I didn't question the norms. The first time I really rebelled was when I got married, an interfaith marriage. I was shocked to discover church membership was no longer open to me—I was not eligible, because membership was only available through your father or husband. Taking interfaith marriage excluded me from membership. Finding AIC, how the organization functions matters to me. Our values and purposes are mirrored in every aspect of our life together.

In Your Words

I researched whether the church was safe to attend as a non-binary person, and appreciated the **openness and clarity** on the website. . . . I didn't find my home church as **unguarded** as this one.

The **clarity of inclusive values** at AIC has been wonderful.

There is **no barrier** between leadership and congregation. People come together to make worship what it is on the day, in that moment. It's not packaged.

Anyone can sing with the right heart, praise God. The **humility** of worship at AIC is egoless, and it makes me feel safe to sing along.

The church used to try to steer a middle ground where no one was offended. Now, there is a different attitude. **We claim who we are**, as broad and open.

Pastoral Perspective

It seems obvious that any faith community would offer clear information about who is welcomed, who can participate, who can be invited into leadership— that's unfortunately not always the case. The clarity expressed above is a beneficial step in displaying our identity for those looking for a spiritual home. And this clarity also protects people from the harm that sin and exclusion can cause — preventing spiritual abuse and manipulation by clearly telling people how they will be treated. Humility, vulnerability, and honesty are good Christian values for individuals and for us collectively as well.

—Pastor Jared

Genuineness and Clear Values

In Your Words

AIC has provided a **space to 'just be.'** My experience of London has been one of persistent demand—career demands, the need to wear the right clothes, the demands to fit into a certain class or income level. None of those demands exist at AIC and **I can be myself.**

My first experience of AIC was the feeling of coming home. As time went on, this community of people became a **key presence in helping me get through the most difficult circumstances** of my life when I lost a child.

AIC helps me to **not be alone in London**, and it has reconnected me with the joy and daily routine practice of faith from long ago.

I felt a sense of **belonging** immediately. AIC is **family** to me.

Church is a place to give and to receive, a place to have **friends and community.**

The church has become like a best mate that I want to talk about and introduce to other people. It's a **community**, not Bible-bashing, but a place that shows you how to use your spirituality.

Church has become a **place to stay and rest.**

Special **connections** are made at AIC.

I came to AIC seeking **community**, not necessarily for God. I just felt a need for **belonging**, and thought church might offer that.

This is my **home.**

I love how we pray for each other, and see the whole human condition, joy and suffering.

Someone helps me up the stairs every Sunday. AIC is a place where I have the freedom to **ask others for help** without fear, apprehension or judgement.

You come up the stairs at AIC and **someone knows your name.**

Key Story

As an expat in an unknown place, I can't overestimate the importance of having a place of connection. My most significant moment at AIC was having our daughter's first birthday at the church picnic when we didn't have family around. As people living away from home and other family, the church has become our experience of family.

Pastoral Perspective

We all need people who support us and provide us with the connections that help to make our life and faith meaningful and robust. These stories and comments reflect that AIC provides a supportive community because of the ministry that happens from one member to another. The Church is the Body of Jesus Christ — reaching out to each member with friendship that affirms our worth and with care that lifts us up in the darkest moments. This is more necessary than ever as fissures in our society seem to be widening. —*Pastor Jared*

Belonging and Community

Key Story

The nationalities from around the world together at AIC are inspiring, and the diverse cuisine at our Thanksgiving lunch is a beautiful image of bringing us all together. I never feel confident that there is enough food at our church luncheons, but there is always leftover food—a beautiful metaphor.

Pastoral Perspective

We are not just diverse between different kinds of people, but we are individuals with multiple belongings. One person at AIC often belongs to multiple nationalities, cultures, religious backgrounds, or races. When our welcome statement says, “your whole self matters to God and to us,” we recognise that complexity within and between each person. Most institutions group us by our needs (patient, client, person with disabilities) or our wants (consumer, guest) or our assets (profession, skill set, wealth) or our identity (gender, sexuality, race). At AIC, we work to see the whole person, complex and intertwined capacity to give and to receive.

—Pastor Jennifer

In Your Words

I appreciate the leadership of the church and how the conversations about LGBTQ inclusion allowed time and listening for everyone. This all leads to inclusion—**allowing people to express their opinions** and comfort/discomfort can change people. This is something I value deeply.

I’m set in my Anglican convictions, but I enjoy having an **ecumenical** engagement at AIC.

I wanted to raise my kids in a space **free from judgement** and **open to questions**.

I struggle with organized religion, but AIC doesn’t mind and frees me to choose.

Everyone is important at AIC, from rough sleepers to Council members.

There is room here for two homes, both US and UK, and I don’t have to reject one or the other, **I can be both**.

There is **room for conflict**—people can decide differently based on their understanding of the bible, and there is **room for that difference**.

Diversity and Multiplicity

In Your Words

It's a cliché to say 'what would Jesus do?' but we do that in our location, how **we reach out and serve** and continue to evolve. A real strength, and it makes me proud to be part of it.

Religion doesn't matter to me if it is only about believing in God and being good. It has to be about **giving back**, about contributing without feeling like I had to join or earn the right to contribute.

AIC is a place that has people **trying to be better humans**.

We **care** what happens outside our building.

I like the inclusive welcome at AIC that seems to match what Jesus preached. Christians are called not just to have prayerful and faithful religious life, but to **live faithfully** in interactions with others. AIC does this in **tangible ways** in a challenging context.

Wherever God is, that's where I want to **share what I have been given**.

Key Story

On the way to AIC from Warren Street station, I saw a rough sleeper asking for food, but I was late for church. After church, I bought some muffins and gave it to them. I felt emboldened to do things like this because I know the church is trying just as hard.

Pastoral Perspective

People at AIC agree with St. James that we should be "doers of the word, not merely hearers" because "faith without works is dead." Our congregation seeks faith that makes a difference in our lives and enables us to make a difference in the world. This shapes a personal and communal commitment to social action, service and justice-building in our community that is as core to our understanding of faith as prayer, scripture or worship.

—Pastor Jennifer

Living and Active Faith

Key Story

The idea of justice and liberation has become key to being able to stay within the faith. In 2020, my home church fumbled the response to Black Lives Matter badly. I led prayers of intercession and prayed boldly, only to realise the church was not ready for that witness and I was closed out. I came to AIC as a theatre client, had seen signs in the hallways about welcome and been intrigued, but then was able to see that it was real and authentic. I value critical engagement with the text—I'm too smart to believe in God without engaging critically. I need community, and wept the whole hour my first time in church, but kept coming. I don't know how I feel about Christianity, but AIC gives me hope because it engages the world and wrestles with complexity.

Pastoral Perspective

I often provide pastoral support to people who are earnestly, even desperately, trying to resolve questions about God. It might frustrate those same people to pause and recognise that doubts are evidence of faith that is deep, examined, and valued. Our church is full of people who are not easily satisfied with platitudes and abstract ideas that don't match reality. These bold questions keep our faith alive. —*Pastor Jennifer*

In Your Words

I've **learned to be more accepting** as the kinds of people I've met through AIC **expanded my perspective** and made me more inclusive.

My family says, 'that's so much more like you—**you're much better off in that church!**'

For my kids, I want them to have space for **both faith and questions**, about how to live life in the best way possible.

I needed **purpose** while floating without an anchor and drinking too much. AIC has **moved my focus** from alcohol to helping in the community.

I'm more open about my faith and its power to bring people together under the guise of human dignity. AIC invited a **change in behaviour**—a thoughtful change in how I want to treat my colleagues in the workplace.

I'm naturally **curious**, I question everything, but here there is a community of like-minded people. I feel my talents and knowledge are used well and **I can grow**.

Community is something I have appreciated about AIC as I have worked in the Shelter, led in the youth group, and represented young people in processes like adopting our welcome statement. **I have faith in AIC** because of this community and it has given me a unique experience as I develop into an adult, adopting AIC's values because I trust the community.

Space to Change and Grow

In Your Words

I can invite anybody I want and know they will be well received. . . . I trust the church here. That gives me more space in my heart for the love of Jesus and helping others because I'm **not nervous about what will happen at church**. It's safe to be open and to be myself.

I have **faith in AIC**.

AIC has the reputation of being **genuine** in our actions and it's a church I **trust**.

AIC helps us have **trust** in the organization that's bigger than individuals.

There is room here to say 'something's not right,' and be supported to raise concerns. I can be **honest about who I am** and what I believe, and not accept the status quo. There's room to find your own way within the community.

Key Story

If any church was weird or wrong, I was in it. I saw a lot of unhealthy, exclusive and discriminatory practices in churches. I felt like an outcast, then realized I enjoy the fringe of churches, it's where the good people are. This is a place that is safe to explore the Bible and ask questions. The choir once sang a song about violence, and I couldn't participate because I disagreed with the words so I sat out—and that was ok.

Pastoral Perspective

Trust is easy to break and hard to rebuild. Many people at AIC have experienced broken trust with churches in their past. AIC's intentional and clear statement of values makes it safe to disagree, safe to explore, safe to believe again. The trustworthiness extends to Council's work on setting policies and managing affairs in ways that build transparency and reliability. We often describe God as having "steadfast love," meaning a love you can trust to remain always. Our efforts to be trustworthy as a church help us show and share that kind of steadfast love of God, though we are human and will still fail and disappoint one another sometimes.

—Pastor Jennifer

Trust and Safety

Key Story

There's always joy at AIC. Scott's direction of the music conveys joy and this theme is always complemented by Jennifer and Jared in their leadership of the service. I am theologically drawn to joy in Christian experience, and it isn't only a theological abstraction here.

Pastoral Perspective

Joy is a spiritual strength — and if I'm honest, it's not my strength. But at AIC there's an uplifting energy that sweeps us all up and brings us a step closer to God — you can see in these stories that it's often from music, and also from a broader sense of hope and creativity. This reminds me that we're in church to know truths that have the power to set us free, as Jesus put it in John chapter eight. People make a conscious choice to come to AIC because of positivity and enjoyment, which are evidence that we are collectively understanding God's sacred truth.

—Pastor Jared

In Your Words

I leave worship always feeling a sense of **surprise** and **enduring joy** beyond Sunday.

AIC conveys **life and hopefulness** that offers a heartening experience.

I look forward to going to AIC. **No one is here because they have to be here**—but because they want to.

Nothing is forced here. **We come because God loves us.**

I got a **good feeling**.

It seems that there is a lot of toxicity in the world so I was looking for a Christian community with **positivity**. I felt immediately welcomed at AIC.

There is a thoughtfulness and a bespoke nature to the worship, and a **creative energy** to the activities in the building and involvement in the community.

Holy Joy and Freedom

Next Steps

Concluding our conversations, we asked participants to tell us a next step based on the stories they had shared and heard from others. Here is what our congregation wanted to do next:

- Meet/talk to more people at AIC – 8 people
- Attend Bible study / Learn more about faith – 6 people
- Invite people to church / help the church grow – 6 people
- Engage with community work / volunteer – 3 people
- Reconnect with AIC – 2 people
- Stay connected with people from their listening group – 2 people
- Invite queer Christians to talk about their experiences
- Learn from LGBTQ Christians so nobody has to experience harm anymore
- Bring my family members to a listening group
- Use art to contribute to the church
- Be an ambassador for progressive values starting with faith
- Engage Church Council in this process – learning from stories
- Be present
- Write a book
- Engage with Citizens UK
- Be more open to God's guidance
- Pray more
- Focus on Jesus
- Integrate AIC's values into my life
- Join the choir
- Live out my own values in daily life
- Evaluate how I spend my time and volunteer
- Prioritise my faith
- Rest

AIC's Shared Values

Our Relationship with God

Living and Active Faith

Taking God Seriously

Our Relationship with One Another

Welcome and Acceptance

Belonging and Community

Diversity and Multiplicity

Our Relationship with Church

Trust and Safety

Genuineness and Clear Values

Space to Change and Grow

Holy Joy and Freedom

2024

What external relationships grow and extend our ministry?

