

Senior Warden Report
Al Rider
St. Mary's Episcopal Church
January 29, 2017

Good Morning.

About this time last year, Weezie and I sat down in her office to begin the planning for 2016. We knew it would be a year with potential challenges and possibly directions unknown. At the end of our meeting I suggested to Weezie that the word for the year should be "Enthusiasm". I felt the word incorporated the notion of action and positive zeal for our future. That next Sunday I mentioned "enthusiasm", the word of the year, to Bob Hetherington. Bob explained to me the Greek derivative for enthusiasmen and Theos.....Inspired by God. Wow!! How appropriate for what lay ahead of us.

So today, a year later, how do we describe this past year at St. Mary's Church? The easy answer is "the year of transition". But I think that is a gross understatement and does not do justice to what has occurred. When we look back 12, or even 18, months and recount events, a more appropriate term might be "miraculous hand off". Think about this..... We have seen the retirement of our beloved Rector of 35 years, John Miller, along with our Associate Rector Eleanor Wellford. We have welcomed an entire new clergy, beginning with Weezie for whom we had to negotiate a Diocesan gauntlet of titles beginning with Temporary Associate Rector, to Priest in Charge, to Interim Rector to finally, and thankfully, Rector.....the coming and going of Emily Rowell Brown, and now the happy anticipation of our new Associate Rector Andrew Moore..... the willingness of Bob Hetherington to come off the sidelines to be our Priest Associate and comfort us with his counsel and deep experience.....an entirely new high energy Program staff, Matt Rawls, Amelia McDaniel and Ashley Cameron..... On the administrative side, Lori Smiley after 20 years retired to tend to her family. Today, immediately following this service, we will honor Gina Alexander, our Parish Administrator of 22 years, who begins a much deserved retirement. And this past Monday Mike Koschak joined the St. Mary's family in the newly created position of Executive Director -Church Operations.

So with the exception of our long time Sextons Paul Pace and Hersaine Agudelo and our fabulous Organist and Choir Master Dwight Graham, every member of the clergy, program and administration has a new face. And it all happened in less than 18 months. Under virtually any organizational theory, our church should have been greatly challenged and susceptible to significant disruption. Fortunately for us that has not been the case.

I am reminded here of a class I took my second year of graduate business school, Organizational Behavior taught by Alec Horniman. I have to admit that I signed up for the course because 100% of your grade was class participation.... No papers or exams.....my kind of course. But as I look back, it is the subject I remember best. The course was promoted as a study of the management of employees, but its emphasis was the understanding of organizational culture. Professor Horniman argued that an organization's culture was A, if not the, critical driver of long term success and sustainability, or the lack thereof. And cultures

don't pivot quickly. It takes time, a proper sense of direction and commitment to build a strong culture.

In St. Mary's case I submit confidently that our culture has sustained us over the past 18 months. Indeed, it is our sense of humility, love of place, simplicity, tradition, community and willingness to embrace change that has guided us. Our culture formed over one and one half centuries is our fountain and filled with the Spirit. This fountain, the St. Mary's culture, the St. Mary's spirit, is why we are here today. Over time there are changing faces in the pews and at the Altar, but we remain the same place. And it is a good place.

We began this year with our Discernment, a self-study. Led so well by Tim O'Shea, with over 60 active participants, the process was both dynamic and calming. The views of each member of our Parish were solicited, and many responded. We paused and took time to listen to "God's calling for St. Mary's". Formed with a consensus view, our Discernment Report continues to provide direction and inspiration. The Vestry has been, and continues to be, committed to fostering the recommendations and addressing the questions offered by the various Discernment sub groups.

Two primary themes of our Discernment were a call to engagement and to increased participation. Happily, we are seeing an enthusiastic response to those calls. Sunday service attendance is up with a positive trend. Our Stewardship Committee now numbers twelve rather than the one or two lone soldiers of recent years. Co-chairs Jane du Frane, Faye Lohr and Tom Slater have committed to lead it for two years to build continuity. Our youth and childrens ministries are vibrant. Matt Rawls and Amelia McDaniel are Pied Pipers. Their enthusiasm for their work is reflected by the impressive growth in school age participation.

The importance of communication was a consistent theme mentioned in each of the Discernment sub-committee reports. With the arrival of Ashley Cameron as Director of Communication and Parish Life, we have reached a whole new level of information flow and creative messaging. A position long overdue, but now well filled. Our music program under the leadership of Dwight is such a blessing and our choirs both adult and the children's', led by Children's Choir director Adam Bailey, continue to enrich our services. I know that anyone who attended this year's evening service of Lessons and Carols shares my gratitude for the beautiful music that glorified and captured the anticipation and peace of Advent.

David Rose has offered an encouraging financial report. He and his expanded Finance Committee are thoughtful and vigilant stewards of our assets and focused on meeting our obligations. This past summer and fall, the Finance Committee oversaw the comprehensive review of our financial systems and controls conducted by our outside auditors Mitchell Wiggins.....an appropriate exercise at time of transition. Finishing 2016 with a surplus is a testament to the skills of our Finance Committee and leadership of our Rector. Bishop Shannon was amazed to hear that, contrary to the national norm, St. Mary's annual giving and finances did not falter in our period of transition.

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I might add that our Bishop has commented to me on more than one occasion about the "unique character "and sometimes "independence", of St. Mary's. I just smile back and thank him for his blessing.

Our various other committees and groups, Fellowship, Altar Guild, Building & Grounds, Children, Youth & Seniors all experienced heightened participation. Their service and ministries keep our campus in perpetual motion. The expanded adult and youth education offerings enrich our souls and challenge our thinking. The Adult Forum has quickly become a mainstay on Sunday mornings. Our relationship with St. Mary's Episcopal School has strengthened and we think now as one entity rather than two. Over the past year, attention to Outreach, mission trips and pastoral care has expanded and will continue to do so. We are living our call to go forth and serve! Weezie will talk more about this renewed focus.

There are many people to recognize for their service. First we thank Bill Gooch who agreed to extend his tour of leadership duty on the Vestry as Treasurer this past year. His steady hand was critical during our time of transition. We have four outgoing members of the Vestry who have generously given their time and talents to this Parish. Scott Barton for two years was that lone stewardship soldier to whom I referred earlier. But what an army of one or two! Annual giving was up nicely both the years he led our Annual Stewardship. Steve Guza has for decades, not years, effectively helped oversee the construction and maintenance of our beautiful campus. Most recently he served our Parish well as Head of Building and Grounds. Hopefully you all have read Brantley Holmes recent inspirational reflection on her Vestry service. If not, I highly recommend it. She has been a powerful voice on behalf of our Children and Youth interests. Jane duFrane has served as Junior Warden for two years. The Junior Warden is by tradition the people's warden. Jane has served that call with grace, dedication and willingness to take on any task. Her leadership and counsel have been immensely integral to the success we have enjoyed this year. It has been a special joy for me to serve as a Warden with her.

I have already mentioned the importance and success of our Discernment. It was a foundational endeavor that will positively direct our vision and planning for the foreseeable future. Tim O'Shea's leadership of this effort was nothing short of extraordinary. He embraced this task with full dedication and led a motivated cross section of our congregation to decipher Gods Calling for St. Mary's. Well done. We owe deep gratitude to Tim and all who graciously served.

Bob Hetherington served as Chaplain and spiritual compass to the Discernment Committee. How fortunate St. Mary's is to have Bob in our lives, especially this past year. From a clerical point of view, Bob has seen it all and will always bring the proper measure to a discussion. Whether it is in our newly formed Tuesday morning men's spiritual practice group, or in his sermon or in a quick conversation on the walkway, Bob inevitably offers a comment or shares a thought that causes me to think on a higher plane. Bob told me a couple of months ago that he would like to stay at St. Mary's for so long as there was a need. On behalf of the entire congregation, I am comfortable in saying..... we need you Bob!

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Our discernment led us to God's calling. Throughout our process we not only listened but we also observed. We watched our Interim Rector in action. We heard her perspective, measured her guidance and listened to her desires for the future of St. Mary's. Come Spring and early summer, rising in a flow of grace to the congregation, to the Discernment Committee and to the Vestry, it was clear that there was solid alignment of vision and a growing love between Weezie Blanchard and St. Mary's Church. With the simple words "we invite you to be" and "yes", St. Mary's celebrated the welcoming of its Fourth permanent Rector this fall. We are blessed.....

Enthusiasm, En and Theos, Inspired by God

God's Calling for St. Mary's. May we always be listening.