

RECTOR'S ADDRESS for Annual Meeting, 2017

To the beloved of Christ Jesus who are the Church of St. Peter's in Spotswood, blessed of God the Father through Jesus Christ, inspired in faith and grace by the Holy Spirit and empowered as servants and apostles of the Good News of the Gospel: peace and grace to you in the name of our Beloved Savior! Each year, as the parish readies for its annual meeting, it falls to me to reflect on the year past and what God has been doing in the life of the parish. Each year, it is my honor to dream with you for the future of what God might be calling forth from us as people commissioned by the Body and Blood of Jesus to proclaim, teach and serve a Gospel which reminds us that we and all God's created are known, beloved and graced with the sure knowledge that we are alive today and will know life eternal by His Holy Name.

Every morning, I wake and give thanks for the honor of serving this parish community. As the 36th rector of this line, I am aware of the weight of history around us and of the passion for God that has sustained us this far. We have served this community through the rugged days of Revolution, disestablishment, the dawn of the Industrial and Technological Revolutions, a Civil War, two World Wars, the Great Depression and several Great Recessions. We have prayed for kings as the sovereign governors of our Church, and for Presidents and Congresses (both of the Continental and Federal models). We have engaged in praising God through 5 revisions of the Book of Common Prayer itself. Though these great moments of history ring dramatic chords, I remain deeply minded of the beauty that this church was born to: that it has served the poor and hungry, the needy and dispossessed in each of those ages. Through it all, though, our history is a story told by loving people united by common prayer to live lives of peace in service and devotion to God. It is no small truth that our informal motto is, and has always been to all who arrive here, "Welcome Home."

2016 was a year that brought to us its unique challenges. At the top of that list is our mutual discernment regarding our commitment to worship and formation as it affects our youngest members. After a lot of prayer, work and planning, we resolved to change the program times for our Sunday school, and to streamline our 10 AM worship service in order to accommodate the demands of supporting the spiritual growth of families in today's world. It was challenging, but the change yielded growth in both our formation program and our worship attendance. I also wish to thank our leadership, teachers and parents for their support. We have seen the growth of our younger members this past year as they eagerly claim both their learning about and worship of God for their own.

Formation and Congregational Development were the primary focus of our Vestry and for the Way of St. Paul group. The Vestry chose as its primary focus this year the building up of its fluency in three areas:

Praise, Formation and Service. Each month, we took on a different aspect of our parish life in light of one or more of these areas with the intent to deepen your leadership's ability to speak to, and lead us on into, deeper growth in Christ as a parish. The Way of St. Paul came to maturity with projects in its second year, ranging from our Laetare Sunday Supper fellowship to the inception of St. Pete's Little Fishes and the revival of our Vacation Bible School program.

Service to Christ is not just attention to self; it must have an outlet in service to others in the merciful name of Jesus. 2016 saw continued renewal in our Helping Hands ministry, with members crafting blankets, hats, scarves and other items for the Seaman's Church Institute, St. Peter's University Hospital, area outreach ministries, and our own church families for Baptismal blankets. Recently, members have also joined other service groups to craft shelter pads for the homeless out of discarded plastic market bags. Numerous in-gatherings continue to support mission in our area. As well, Change for Change has had a banner year, with renewed support from our Sunday attendees that enable us to fund missions at home and abroad.

Community of Hope Ministries and Alice's CUP has continued to grow. Our Parish gardens flourish and provide produce for the pantry. The Community Supper has offered almost 4000 meals and fellowship to our neighbors and friends. Thank you to Jeannie and the crew for making that happen, 50 weeks out of the year. The Pantry meets the needs of nearly 5000 individuals each month. Thank you to our volunteers who support these incredible efforts!

Our Thrift Shop flourishes with vibrant life as well, thanks to the devotion of our volunteers and leaders. Each year, they have increased their income line....but that is just one bit of evidence of the full fruits of their work. They take used items and repurpose them into vital support for folks in our community who cannot afford to shop retail, or who chose to live simply through "upcycling" items that would otherwise simply wind up in a landfill. The fellowship, friendship, care and love that go into the welcome extended to our shoppers (and to those who shop for free because they are in critical need), is without parallel. We are blessed to have these folks support us with their service...and to have their service in turn support and quicken our mission and work as a parish.

This is a community that gathers in the name of Jesus nearly every day of the week to offer prayer and praise to God in Christ, but it is also a community that rejoices to gather in fellowship and celebration. We rejoiced in our third annual Pig Roast, our Easter Egg Hunt, and our annual Pancake Supper and our various "dine to donate" events. We took the time to work together to clean up our Church grounds

seasonally, to polish, clean and decorate for Holy Week, Easter and Christmas. We laughed and wept as we marked baptisms, wedding and funerals.

Thanks to the hard work of our Buildings and Grounds leadership, we have continued to build on our capital work with the painting of the Parish Hall and the installation of new air conditioning in the Church. Along with various other repairs and improvements, we have worked to ensure that our tools for ministry-these church buildings-are useful now and secure for future generations.

None of this mission work would be possible without the devotion and faith of our membership, for the many hours the people offer their time, talents and resources in order to further the work of Christ in our township and its environs. Thousands and thousands of people benefit from the witness that we offer, and without all of you that work would falter.

Thank you to our wardens, Laura Bonamici and Cathy Clark. They have been more than just a right and left hand to your rector. They are lay leaders who, in the great tradition of St. Peter's, quicken your rector to deeper devotion and better leadership and our membership to more faithful service! Thank you to our ministry leaders, our vestry, and staff (Lisa, Arlene and Clarence) that keep US together in service! From Sunday School to Altar Guild, from Helping Hands to Finance, our leaders make it happen for us in order that we might be empowered to make it happen for others! Please take the time to offer personal thanks to all who labor in order to lessen the challenges we face in serving Jesus. May God bless them, and us, as we strive to show our love for God through faithful service!

We are blessed to live in the community of faith that is the Diocese of New Jersey. Please pray and give thanks for the ministry of our Bishop and his staff. Their support of our mission means deeper resources for our work. I commend to your prayers as well for our fellow churches and the clergy of the Northern Convocation of the Diocese, of whom I am honored to serve as Dean. We continue to dream of ways to deepen our connections with our sister churches, building on the foundation of our shared Ascension Day service with Holy Trinity, South River. More connections and shared ministries will be possible, I pray, in the near future.

My last note of thanksgiving comes in testimony to the gratitude for 260 years of witness to the Gospel that we marked in celebration this past November. With the Visitation of the Bishop, and return of clergy we have loved who have served us faithfully in days past, we took a moment to give thanks for "then" and for "now," and readied ourselves to be faithful stewards of our mission for the years to come. Your

support of our mission is tangible, both in the form of a nearly-balanced budget and in the modest growth we have seen in attendance and membership.

We are known in the diocese as being a church that is “vibrant” with the life of Christ. I am often complimented by folks who have visited with us about how our membership expresses joy, warmth and a particular vitality in service as we practice our faith. My hope and prayer for 2017 is that we continue to build on those foundations, inspiring each other and our neighbors around us to deeper faith and devotion through our praise of God, our depth of formation in Christ and our service to any and all who are in need. That means embracing the truth that we are all works in progress and that this work of the kingdom will never be done as long as one dream, inspiration or opportunity arises. What is your dream for St. Peter’s for the coming year? Is it a ministry that you might partake of, or even one that you might like to begin or create? Is it a renewed commitment to give of yourself, in order that the parish might find even deeper vibrancy to express? Is it just simply a call to deepen your prayer life and discipleship with others in a small group?

Finally, and above all, please join me in giving thanks and praise to a living God whose devotion to us is like our very breath. We *are* because of that great love, because of the Word made flesh that dwells in our midst, because of the grace showered on us by a Creator who yearns for a creation that is made whole, just and right by our labor and by God’s continued inspiration. We know love because God loved us first; and knowing love what can we do but show it by giving freely of our own substance? You are a blessing, beloved St. Peter’s. You are the manifestation of God’s love in this world, and a sign and witness that God’s devotion is with us, always and even beyond the end.

I remain yours, devoted in service to Christ,

The Rev. Marshall Keith Shelly,

36th Rector to the Beloved of Christ at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, Spotswood