

THE STATE OF THE PARISH
Church of the Holy Communion
The Reverend Sandy Webb, Priest-in-Charge
January 25, 2015

The State of the Parish is Strong

This is my fourth State of the Parish address in the eighteen months that we have been together. Each time, I have reported that the state of our parish is strong, and that it is growing stronger every day. This continues to be true. I can see enhanced vitality in the faces of the children processing out to children's church, in the extensive use of our newly renovated third floor, in the way we wrap our arms around each other in times of crisis. In short, it's a great time to be at Holy Communion!

Statistics

True renewal can only be experienced, but it is still helpful to track our metrics. Attendance in 2014 tracked closely with our attendance patterns in 2012. This reflects a slow, but steady, pace of growth.

Growth in our finances outpaces growth in attendance. In 2013, our pledge budget was \$1.19 million. In 2014, \$1.38 million, an increase of more than fifteen percent. In 2015, \$1.48 million, an increase of another 7.4%. This growth is remarkable, and I thank you for your investment in our mission.

Last year, I indicated that our increased giving left us with a choice to be cautious or to be bold. We chose to be bold, but must maintain our resolve. Our 2015 pledge campaign puts us ahead of where we were in 2010, but still short of our record highs. Also, 2014 saw the lowest pledge payment rate in several years. Had we been fully staffed, we would have come up short.

Giving at Holy Communion is hard to predict. We consistently lag behind during the summer months and then (usually) catch up in December, a month that sees twice or three times as much giving as any other. While we anticipate this, it makes planning virtually impossible, because we do not know until on or after December 31 if we will finish in deficit, balance, or surplus. Our commitment to hiring additional staff next year requires that we address these issues. We still have distance to cover in expanding our pledge budget, our pledge fulfillment, and our pledging base. We all have a role to play in the ongoing redevelopment of this parish.

One pastoral note: My primary interest will always be your spirit, not your money. If your life circumstances change such that you cannot fulfill your pledge, please let me know so that your church family can walk with you in whatever you are facing. I will keep your financial circumstances private, but a burden shared is a burden halved. There is nothing we cannot handle if we face it together.

Looking Forward

My last several State of the Parish addresses have focused on how the parish was doing at the time, but it is now time to turn our eyes forward. We will launch three major new initiatives in the next seven months: A new model of adult formation, a new outreach initiative, and a Festival of the Sacred Arts.

Adult Formation

The vestry's strategic working group on adult formation was clear in its desire that we have multiple options every Sunday morning. With a very few exceptions, we will do just that. Our goal is that you will have a hard time choosing. In addition to continuing the Parish Hall Forum and Contemporary Theological Issues, we will introduce a nine-part class organized by an extraordinary team of volunteers convened by Marlene Shaw to discuss the issues we face in our various stages of life.

We will also re-introduce small group ministry, but in an entirely new way. Recent literature suggests that small groups are most effective when they are structured around an outward focus. Therefore, all of our groups will include reflections on the disciplines that enable us to live more deeply into our faith. Some groups will study a book on exactly this topic. Some groups will focus on other books selected by the clergy, and will focus on a modified set of Christian disciplines. My Parish Hall Forum class for the next two weeks will delve into this more deeply.

I will also re-offer *My Episcopal Life* on Wednesday nights in Lent (except for the first class, which is rescheduled to the following Sunday). This was the best-attended class we offered last year, and is designed for anyone who wants to hear again the great story of the Christian faith and the Episcopal expression of that faith. This class also serves as preparation for those adults who want to be confirmed by the Bishop at his annual visitation on April 26.

The Episcopal Service Corps

This summer, we will launch an outreach ministry unlike any that Memphis has ever before seen. Five young adults, mostly fresh college graduates, will come to our city and spend a year in the direct service of the poor and marginalized while living in Christian community with one another. This program, officially recognized as a part of the nation-wide Episcopal Service Corps and designated locally as "City of Soul," is sponsored jointly by Grace-St. Luke's and Holy Communion, a wonderful example of how Episcopal churches in Memphis are working together rather than competing.

GSL will place full-time interns at BRIDGES, St. Columba Center, and the Shelby County Public Defender's Office. Holy Communion will place full-time interns at the Emmanuel Center and at MIFA. Our interns will worship with us on Sundays and be a part of our church family. Curate Hester Mathes and the City of Soul board, chaired by Stephanie Cheney, are actively soliciting applications if you know someone who would be a good candidate.

It is my hope that our engagement with the Episcopal Service Corps, and our expanding partnership with some of our oldest ministry partners, will inaugurate a new era of hands-on outreach ministry at Holy Communion. Our interns, under Hester's supervision, will create opportunities for all of us to serve our neighbors – so, roll up your sleeves!

Sacred Arts Festival

In lieu of a single guest lecturer this spring, we will host a weekend-long festival of the sacred arts, which we have entitled *Alleluia be our Measure*. Three renowned artists will be with in residence with us from May 1-3,

both teaching and creating in our space. The weekend will culminate in a public event on Saturday, May 2, and all three artists will be with us for a parish-wide forum on Sunday morning, May 3.

- The Reverend Dr. Bill Roberts, professor of music at Virginia Theological Seminary, will be gathering a regional choir for instruction and performance. We will also debut a new hymn commissioned for the occasion, and the hymn tune will be named “Walnut Grove.”
- Mel Ahlborn, founding president of Episcopal Church and the Visual Arts, will debut a new painting commissioned for the event. She will also offer instruction on manuscript illumination and be available for open studio time with parish and diocesan artists.
- Susan Cherwien, a noted hymn writer, will also be with us, offering classes for creative writers, and conversing with Dr. Roberts and Ms. Ahlborn, both of whom are using one of her hymn texts as their inspiration.

The Church has a great history of expressing its faith in the form of art, and promoting the creation of new work by talented and faithful artists. This spring, Church of the Holy Communion joins the centuries-long legacy of European cathedrals who have commissioned work from some of the history’s most influential artists. However, we will approach this art in a twenty-first century way, inviting each and every one of you to be a part of the creative process, to be coached in music, to learn manuscript illumination, be challenged as a writer. There is a place for you at this festival, and I hope that you will mark your calendar now.

A Vision for our Future

In two weeks, your Vestry will go on its annual retreat. Our purpose this year is to cast a vision for Holy Communion in the years ahead. This conversation will be an ongoing one, and we invite everyone in the congregation to be a part of the conversation by coming to a special parish-wide adult forum on February 15.

In the meanwhile, however, there remain three things that each one of us can do to help move our congregation forward:

1. Invite people to church: There is nothing that anyone can say or do that will have a greater effect on the likelihood that someone will come to church than your personal invitation.
2. Engage in a new ministry: Try something that you haven’t done before. Join a small group. Meet some new people. Discover whether God might have more in store for you.
3. Give generously: Holy Communion’s endowment does not support its operating budget. Everything that we do is principally underwritten by individual gifts.

Conclusion

It remains my great honor and privilege to be in ministry among and alongside each one of you. Our future together is bright, and I am excited to see what God is about to do in and through us for the advancement of his Kingdom.

Amen.