

Address to Annual Meeting
Christ Episcopal Church
Spotsylvania, Virginia
January 22, 2012

It is my pleasure to be addressing you at this my twelfth annual meeting at Christ Church. 2011 was a good year, with plenty of challenges. At this time last year, I was telling you about a challenge pledge to our Christ Church 20/20 capital campaign that would bring in \$50,000 if we were able to generate a new \$100,000 in pledges. That was the half-way point of the three year campaign. It was an exciting challenge, and it did breathe new life into our pledging. However, there was no way at that time for any of us to know that we would be getting the \$1,000,000 gift that we got. It was yet another example of God's gracious blessing on our little church. And on top of that, we got the \$50k from the challenge.

Joe has already mentioned the financial challenges that we still face. These are real challenges and we are doing our best to meet them. I'd like to mention a few other blessings. Our two big ministries continue to be the Thrift Shop and the Food Pantry. Both are valuable outreach ministries that provide a service to our community. Both are highly visible in the community. Both help our neighbors that are suffering from these economic times. The Thrift Shop also helps our bottom line. I continue to be amazed at the level of involvement and support that these two ministries enjoy. Of course, there is always room for more people to get involved. I'd like to thank the leaders of these ministries: Cheryl Moynahan, Mary Kovach, and Kelly White at the Thrift Shop, and Stephanie Smith the head of the Food Pantry, ably assisted by Roy Smith. And thanks to the many people who work on these two labor intensive ministries.

By the end of the year, the demand on our Food Pantry was so great that we had to close it to new clients. That was a painful decision for those who participate in that ministry. It is

consistent, however, with what we are seeing around us. In the news this past week we heard that not only has the Moss free clinic had to do the same, but other Christian free medical clinics have as well. We pray that the economy improves soon.

Also last year I stood before you and asked the vestry to consider getting involved in ministry in Haiti. I am very excited that we are getting involved in supporting our “big sister church” St. George’s downtown with their partnership with Notre Dame in Port au Prince. Last Sunday at the late service I announced that Denise Regeimbal has been appointed Special Liaison to St. George’s for Haiti Ministry. She will be our contact point with them. Stay tuned for more information about a mission trip to Haiti in the spring. And their priest, Jean fils, will be coming to visit Fredericksburg sometime in May. We hope to have an event that you can attend to meet him.

2011 was our first full year with the ministry of a Family Ministry Coordinator. Jenny has been doing a terrific job. She has been responsible for so many events and ministries that would not have been possible without her: the Children’s Chapel, which she leads Sunday mornings; the ladies tea party that was such a success last spring; the children’s portion of the Lenten series; the picture directory, if Olan Mills ever gets it to us; the Senior Sunday last spring; youth caroling at Christmas time; plus the Super Bowl party coming up, guys; and our first parish retreat at Shrine Mont in May.

Jenny and I were just talking the other day about how her focus needs to change somewhat in 2012. She will be putting more energy into reaching out beyond our congregation to draw in new members. She will do this both by putting the word out about events and programs we already offer, and by working to generate events designed specifically to be attractive to members of the community. She realizes that her continued employment is

contingent on the growth of our parish. I hope we all realize that inviting and welcoming new members is all of our responsibility. Jenny can't generate growth in the parish alone. I can't do it alone. We all need to work together to grow Christ Church.

As I look ahead at 2012, I am very hopeful, for many reasons. We have lots of opportunities to serve God and God's people. We have something to offer, and I believe that people are in need of what we have.

There are just one or two other things I want to talk to you about today. There have been things going on in recent years in the Episcopal Church and in the Diocese that have been hard to deal with. It was recently announced that the Diocese won the law suits that it has been fighting for nearly five years. Bishop Johnston has said that it will be months to years before all the transitions are complete and all the property is back under control of the Diocese.

The law suits in Virginia are only part of the greater struggle that we have been involved in since 2003. We have lost families due to the controversies over human sexuality and the life of faith. So much has happened in the Church in recent years, much of it difficult and painful, with people divided over these emotional issues. Last year at the Diocesan Council Bishop Johnston talked about the issues surrounding the proposed blessing of same-sex unions. In that address, and in other words spoken and printed publicly, he has been very careful in talking about how things are proceeding in the Diocese of Virginia. He has also identified a number of theological questions that need to be answered before anything moves forward. If you have been reading your Virginia Episcopalian, you know that the Bishop is working with congregations that feel they are ready to recognize same-sex relationships in some liturgical way. The Episcopal Church has not yet officially sanctioned the blessing of same-sex unions, but frankly I believe it may happen at the General Convention this July in Indianapolis. For now,

our bishop is leaving the decision up to each congregation. No congregation, he has asserted, will be forced to do anything. There have been eight congregations so far granted permission to do something –and when I say “something” I mean that each congregation has been responsible for proposing exactly what they want to do. They have also been expected to report to the bishop what has been done within the congregation to become ready to proceed.

Since congregations are expected to discern for themselves whether they are ready or not to begin to move in this direction, I have prayerfully considered the question. I have already reported to the vestry that it is my discernment that at this point in time Christ Church is not ready to proceed with any liturgical recognition of same-sex relationships.

By saying that, I do not mean, and I know that it is not true, that we all agree on this subject. In fact, I would say that as a parish we have opinions all over the map. I am simply saying that at this time I discern a kind of predominant attitude on this subject. The fact is that we will probably never all agree about this. This is, in my opinion, the wisdom of the bishop’s plan. Christ Church may never be a parish that has any kind of liturgical recognition of same-sex relationships. But there will be other parishes in the diocese that do. It has been my position all along that this is an issue on which it is not important for us all to agree. However, I would say that it is important that there is a place for everyone in the Church.

I know that this is a difficult, emotional, and divisive topic. I bring it up today because things are happening, in our diocese and in the Episcopal Church, and we at Christ Church cannot ignore or avoid the issue. I confess that I am guilty of preferring to avoid discussion of the topic, hoping to keep the peace. We can’t do that anymore.

What I am proposing is this: that over the course of the next year we begin a conversation, a conversation about all the issues, biblical issues, theological issues, moral issues,

social justice issues, that relate to the question of blessing same-sex unions. To be clear, I am not trying to change anyone's mind, nor am I trying to push an agenda. I am simply, belatedly perhaps, trying to be a good pastor, and help us as a parish deal with an important issue that is before our Church. We haven't done this before now. As I said, I take responsibility for that. The issue is not going away. The time for us to have this conversation is now.

I am still working on a plan to give some structure to our conversation. I can tell you that this will not be a conversation that takes place in one day. We will have a variety of venues, at a variety of times, with a variety of formats. I'll do my best to involve everyone in the conversation, and all points of view.

I realize that this is a risky thing to propose. I am confident, however, that I can count on you, all of you, to be generous in listening to those who have a different perspective from your own, and to be loving and compassionate with each other. The biggest risk that I see is that we will become a divided parish, those on this side, opposed to those on that side. Frankly, that possibility frightens me. If that happens, we will have all failed.

Bishop Gulick, who will be visiting us in two weeks, said once that as Episcopalians we are members of the same family. We are part of a family that is not defined by our blood relations, but rather by our water relations. The waters of Baptism bind us together in the Body of Christ. We can't get rid of each other. As a family, we do what families do. We argue about things. We disagree with one another. We state our positions forcefully. Then we sit down together and have dinner. We love each other, and that love is greater than any one issue that might threaten to divide us.

I invite you all, over the course of the next year, to join in a conversation about the difficult issues of human sexuality. Not because it will be fun. Not because you even

necessarily want to. But because it is an important issue that is facing our Church, and because as members of the Church we need to deal with the issue and with each other.

Most importantly, I believe that this process, this conversation, needs to be wrapped in prayer. Please join me in praying regularly for the Church and for everyone who has been personally affected by this issue. Now seems like a good time to start.

Let us pray...

O Lord, you have called us into community with you and with one another. We did not choose each other. You chose each one of us. As your people, we pray for you grace. Give us the grace to open ourselves to one another, to share our thoughts and feelings with one another, and to hear one another in the process. Open our hearts to your Truth. In the name of your Son Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I look forward to another year with you. May God bless our parish!