

The little church that could ... did ... and does!

Mary E. Peterman

In rural Central Virginia, surrounded by beautiful countryside - yet not too far from bustling Fredericksburg, stands a small 175 year old church. Located in Spotsylvania, VA the church sits at the crossroads of many famous Civil War battles, and the eternal resting place of many of its casualties. Christ Episcopal Church, founded in 1841, bears visible rifle bullet scars in exterior bricks that were handmade by slaves at the time. And given the few buildings erected around Christ Church during the time of the Civil War, the Church was thought to have served as a battlefield clinic or sanctuary for the wounded. One of the oldest graves in the church yard belongs to a confederate soldier, Edgar Harrison, whose family farm was taken over in the war. Gracing the wall in the front of the Christ Church sanctuary is a simple, yet elegant, wooden cross – made lovingly by one of the parish members from the church’s original floor joists.



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In my brief year as a member of this small parish and new Episcopalian, I have wondered often how this small church, with all its rich history, not only survived but purposefully thrived for 175 years. The answers are clearly evident from observing this parish community and are revealing and informative to churches of any size or shape.

So in honor of Christ Episcopal Church's 175th Anniversary, here are the 4 things that makes Christ Church the little church that could, did and does:

- 1) **Be Authentic.** With Christ Church, what you see is what you get – and that is a really positive experience. They do not strive to be a mega church in size or feel, nor believe adopting those strategies would feed the flock they have or provide any real means to grow in members. Rather, when you walk through those red doors on Sunday morning, you can count on the safety and security of a welcoming family, traditional familiar liturgy, learning from an interesting sermon about what scripture meant at the time and, if you open your heart and mind, perhaps how you can apply in your life and the world today.

The predictability is never boring, but is comforting and peaceful in a chaotic and inauthentic world. The Sunday service is hallmarked by what it is most – “worship.” This time spent on Sunday is less about what you might get out of it, but more importantly what you put into it in worshipping and celebrating God. And the outcome is more often than not some unintended wonderful consequences, like - learning something, and feeling loved, forgiven, refreshed and renewed and ... very inspired to take that love into the world in action.

- 2) **Be Loving.** Not the passing “hi – how are you” on a Sunday morning kind of love. No Christ Church loving is that “agape” kind of love - a universal, unconditional love that transcends and serves... no matter what. The parish is demographically diverse in political and worldly views. But in service within or on behalf of Christ Church, none of that impacts the degree to which a parishioner, visitor or those served are loved and cared for. This is a parish that has known many joyous celebrations, as well as unfathomable loss. The loss and grief they have suffered cut so deep into the very being of the parish – magnified even more by its small size.

Yet Christ Church has triumphed with great faith in an even greater God, by loving each other, lifting each other, praying for each other and truly being there for each other - unconditionally. When you are asked “how are you” by a fellow parishioner, you can pretty much know they are not only going to listen intently for your answer, but if they sense you are in need – they will already be planning how they can help. Often they are caught doing the same for each other, even without being asked.

- 3) **Be Humble and Serve.** Christ Church parishioners look outward in service and do amazing things that far transcend a church of its size. With a food pantry (including fresh vegetable garden), thrift store, backpack ministry, Thanksgiving and Christmas food baskets, prayer and healing ministry, the Episcopal Women and Men's groups, Music Ministry, etc. and so on – it's hard to see any parishioner, young or perhaps not so young, who is NOT involved in some outreach ministry. While the data is not readily available, I would venture a guess the percentage of those who participate in outreach is much larger than those who do not. They take their responsibility to serve seriously and make a large impact on their community.

But you would never know from their humble spirits in serving, all that they really invest, every day. The parishioners project a sense of gratitude for the opportunity to serve, not seeking recognition or accolades (even seeming embarrassed when it is offered). This humble tone is set “at the top” from the quiet spirit of Christ Church's rector Father Jeffrey Packard, through the vestry, and into the parish at large – very much inspiring other parishioners to “want some of what they are having” in the opportunity to be of service and a part of the familial mission.

- 4) **Be forward looking.** One might think a 175 year old parish, so rich in history and heritage could become mired in the past and the traditional, at the expense of looking forward. But the reality of Christ Church is quite the opposite. Rather than resting on the laurels of the past, Christ Church openly explores new opportunities to not only feed and care for its flock, but innovative ways to turn those sheep outward to seek other sheep in need of a church home, a place to serve, or just a helping hand.

For example, the Church recently embraced a new communication strategy using social media platforms. In doing so, Christ Church does not seek to change their authentic identity, but rather uses this strategy to capitalize on sharing who they are and how they serve - with a broader audience. Social media is one more communication tool for parishioners, and also a handshake with the world around them - sort of a “hi – here we are and here is who we are ... in case you are interested.” Christ Church's social media strategy is bounded around two core concepts:

- Who we are as a body of Christ and the parish of Christ Episcopal Church (inward facing) **#iamCCSpotsy**
- And then because we are abundantly blessed as a member of the parish and through God's blessing, we have a responsibility to serve the world around us (outward facing) **#iserveU**



In addition to thanking and celebrating with the local community during the 175th birthday bash, (which was communicated in every medium available), Christ Church recognized the blessing of 175 years of service would be best celebrated and acknowledged with more service. And so, the next opportunity and accompanying social media campaign was clearly revealed and “Spirit” inspired.

Palm Sunday, 2017 is exactly 175 days from Christ Church’s anniversary on October 16, 2016. Parishioners and guests of Christ Church have signed a “covenant of service.” (Others have been invited to participate virtually across the Episcopal Church and other faith communities.) Each participant has committed to mindfully perform some act of service or prayer, for someone else, for 175 days. Participants are encouraged to share their ideas and stories of service through social media **#175DaysofService** with hopes of inspiring others to act as well. One parish family is using the **#175DaysofService** as a daily teaching and family sharing time, journaling and talking about their acts of service, kindness and prayer. Another parishioner is putting a dollar in a special jar with every act of kindness and prayer – to be donated to one of the Christ Church missions on Palm Sunday, 2017.

Christ Episcopal Church is fulfilling and embracing the essence of “do what you can, with what you have, where you are.” By God’s wonderful math - if only 175 people did something kind in this way for another person ... more than 30,000 people could be blessed.

That’s how any church, like “the little church that could,” can and will make a big impact!

About the Author: *Mary E. Peterman joined Christ Episcopal Church in early 2016 and is to be officially received into the Episcopal Church in early 2017. A former Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist ... she has openly fallen in love with both the Episcopal liturgy and tradition, but also her “little church that does.” As she continues to explore God’s call, she is seeking opportunities to inspire and positively exploit the giving spirit of her parish and others to turn outwards, serve others and witness through action - as God’s hands and feet in the world.*