

2013
Annual Report
by the Priest-in-Charge
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
McHenry, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and Christ our Savior.

It has been six months and 27 days since I joined you as your priest-in-charge. That hardly seems possible; first that it's been so short a time, and second, that I haven't been with you and part of you forever. But both things are true. On the one hand, it feels like we've barely gotten started; and like we've been partners in ministry for years and years, on the other hand.

In fact, we've done a lot in these six-plus months. The first few weeks are a blur of unpacking and sorting and purging, both at home and here. I'm something of a nester, so it was important to me that I make a space for myself, call it office or study, from which to work and be available. During that time, Eleanor Crump was a god-send to me; always a source of history and information, always ready to help and guide. Thank you, Eleanor.

This is the vestry that called me here: Jim (Lukas), senior warden, Mike (Bell), junior warden, Marilyn (Bell) as our clerk, Rick (Carlstedt), Beth (Lukas), Deb (Lang), Bobbi (Fiali), Jill (Harrison), Faby (Sass), Bill (Lang), and John (Havermeyer). I am deeply grateful to you, and to Pam (Dietmeyer) and Al (Robel) who have stepped in to fill unexpired terms.

The Vestry and Wardens have been a constant source of support, advice, and encouragement. I want to thank Jim Lukas in particular. Jim, you have been available, willing, and forthcoming in your advice and counsel. I can't imagine getting off to this good start without you. As I have told you many times lately, you may be rotating out of the role of senior warden, but you aren't going anywhere, and I'm counting on your continued support.

Mike (Bell), you too have been faithful and supportive every step of the way, and I look forward to your ministry to me and for the parish as senior warden in 2013. Deb (Lang) will undoubtedly be an excellent addition to our team as junior warden. It promises to be a good year.

Having begun in July, almost immediately, we began a conversation about whether to continue to offer one, unified worship service on Sunday mornings, or to return to providing two. Although there was a lot of motivation to continue with one service, after listening to all the input, I decided that it was important at this time in my ministry and our life together to restore the early service. It was agreed by the vestry and those who treasure that first service that we would do this until May and then re-evaluate our worship schedule.

So as you know, our current schedule is 8am, Holy Eucharist: Rite One and 10am, Holy Eucharist: Rite Two. Attendance at the early service averages about 15; and at the second service, about 30 to 40. As best as I can tell, that is a slight increase.

There were two other imperatives we faced right at the start: finding a parish secretary and a director for the preschool. We were fortunate to find just what I was hoping for – overqualified people willing to be underpaid and who wanted to work part-time and enjoy the intangible benefits of working in a church environment. We have been blessed to find Melinda Aivaliotis and Barbara Bridgeman, both of whom fit that description.

Melinda runs our office like a full-time professional while on a part-time schedule, helping me to implement more frequent communication through our mid-week "e-Pistle" and to experiment with more user friendly Sunday service bulletins; all this while keeping up with the day-to-day business of the church. She has quickly become my right hand.

Barbara has stepped into the role of teacher and director of Little Cherubs with grace, quickly becoming endeared to both her students and their parents. Because we got a late start this fall, enrollment is lower than we would want, but I believe that her reputation, and thus the reputation of St. Paul's Little Cherubs Preschool, has taken root and will move us toward full enrollment for the next school year.

Then we faced losing Char Conklin, seduced away by their former church in Wonder Lake. She and Meryl had been part of this parish's life for ten years, and would be irreplaceable. But God is good, and as much as Char was missed, we have been sent Julie Sundin as our Organist/Choirmaster. She joined us in November as the interim, and has now agreed to accept the position permanently, thanks be to God!

If you're keeping up with all this, you realize that your entire staff is new, with the exception of Charlie Boak, volunteer sexton extraordinaire, by the way. But it seems that my concern about this was needless. You have welcomed and supported Melinda, Barbara, and Julie beautifully.

Meanwhile, Larry Eils, after getting the Diaper Bank whipped into shape last year, decided to really retire and informed me of his intention to resign as its director. Let me say here that were it not for Larry, we might not still have this ministry. Again, thank you, Larry.

After a prolonged search, we have been blessed beyond measure to have the Rev. Phyllis Mueller agree to accept that position. As a retired Presbyterian minister and the founding director of the first shelter for victims of domestic violence in this county, Home of the Sparrow, Phyllis brings to this role her vast experience and connections in this community. I am deeply grateful to have her join us in this capacity. Once again, welcome, Phyllis.

In these first few months, we have taken steps to improve and update what I call our infrastructure. With the help of the Endowment Fund, we have

- replaced outdated computers
- installed a new phone system
- had the carpet in the parish hall and offices professionally cleaned, avoiding replacement at this time
- had major repairs done to the heating system in the parish hall

In addition, we had a major parish work day and purged every closet and storage area in the building. We had the worn, mismatched furniture removed, and we replace the second-hand Catholic missal/hymnals in our pews with the authorized Episcopal hymnal. And while that last change is taking some adjustment, I very much appreciate your willingness to follow me in this direction.

All of this speaks of change, and this parish has had much – too much – change in its short history; a history I am coming to understand more clearly as I live into our life together and as Bill helps me uncover the historical records of the parish.

Frankly, I was becoming discouraged as the realities of the place came into focus. Against the backdrop of past conflict with clergy and the ongoing financial shortfall, I was asking myself whether I was called by God to help you close this place or – what. And the “what” was not clear to me.

The “what” is still not clear to me, but the response to our pledge campaign has renewed my hope and lifted my spirits, and should lift yours, too! Thirty-two pledges in 2012 totaled just over \$49,000. The same number of pledges for 2013 is over \$63,000. That speaks volumes to me, not only of your generosity, but of your commitment to the future. If, as I believe, stewardship is a spiritual issue, this is a very good sign of our spiritual health.

When the vestry talks about their call to me, they almost always include their expectation that I will grow the church. No matter how many times – even from our earliest conversations and interviews – I have insisted that no, I am not going to grow the church, that WE will have to do that together – that language seems to persist. Nevertheless, I will keep emphasizing that point: I am not here to grow the church. But I will help *you* do it.

In service to that hope, I have some goals for us to consider.

- First, we must become self-sufficient. The income of the parish, primarily from pledges, must rise to meet our operating expenses.

And let me say here that while I hope we can attract new members, we must dissuade ourselves of the notion that new members will mean more money. Not only is it true that new members often take years to understand stewardship and become significant givers, but that mentality borders on exploitation; that is, expecting others to come here and give money so that we can maintain *our* church.

Instead, let us ask: what can we do to serve others, to serve the community? Who is God calling us to be and what is God calling us to do? For if we are to attract new people to come here, it will be because they see something in us – as people and as a community of faith – that draws them closer to the heart of God. And that is a desire to serve God and to participate in the redemption of the world.

- Secondly, let's build up the endowment fund; not to fund our budget, but to allow us to use our other resources for mission and ministry. To that goal, I will offer a "Life Plans" workshop during Lent to address end-of-life plans and to encourage each of us to include the church in our wills.

We are currently relying on our modest endowment fund to make up our budget shortfall, even dipping into the corpus. Doing so has been a conscious decision to invest in the future, which is bold and faithful thing to do. There is certainly no point in nursing an endowment fund while the parish withers on the vine. But it is a limited resource, and we have a duty to honor the original bequest of Ms. Amy Wattman and, if possible, to see that it bears fruit.

These goals – to become self-sufficient and to grow the endowment fund -- are both do-able. These are goals within our reach. To help us look to this future, I would like for us to dedicate this year, 2013, to a reflection on our history. Because it is true: when we don't understand our history, we're destined to repeat it.

Over the course of the year, let's have a series of get-togethers designed to help us do that reflecting; not as some kind of morbid way of dwelling in the past, but with openness and holy curiosity, to learn from it and move on.

This process will also help us to discern and articulate our mission, our vision, for the work God has given us to do. And having a clear mission and vision will, in turn, help us to invite others to join us in that service. All things come together in God's will.

January 15, 1956, was the date of the first service held at St. Paul's Church. In 2014, that day falls on a Wednesday. I propose that on that date, we have a service of rededication and renewal, and invite Bishop Lee to join us for that event.

Meanwhile, this is my prayer for us, right out of our Prayer Book:

Almighty and everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

And amen.

Faithfully submitted,

Lori M. Lowe, SSAP
Priest-in-Charge
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
January 27, 2013