

The Rector's Report to Vestry *for the Year 2010*

St. James Emerging

I hope everyone gathered here today is feeling a great sense of accomplishment. I hope so – because there is every reason in the world for you to be feeling this. We've come through a very difficult journey together. In doing so we've learned things about ourselves, we've learned things about our wider community and perhaps we have also learned something about God.

It was exactly a year ago today that we had to cancel our annual Vestry meeting: The building engineer had told us that our hall as well as our church needed immediate work and that we had to vacate. The amount of work that had been suddenly dumped in our lap was hard to take in. The handful of people who were here that morning gathered in the club room, joined hands, and said the Lord's Prayer. Later that evening we gathered over at Zion Lutheran church and tried to identify some of the decisions that we needed to make. For many of us it really felt quite overwhelming. It tested us severely. How shall we worship together without a building? How shall we do our ministry without resources? How shall we move forward on a path that is totally new and uncertain? There's no doubt that it was a challenge to our ministry, our finances, our outreach, our fellowship, and even our future.

But as the old saying goes: "When the going gets tough the tough get going". Together we pulled through – not just because we're stubborn – but because we felt that God is calling us to continue our special witness and ministry for this community. Together we found ways of making things happen and getting them done. The Building Restoration committee met – met again – and then met some more – working at a feverish pace with the engineer and contractors. They knew that this was an incredibly important job: it had to be done right and it had to be done quickly. All the while, we were able to maintain our regular worship at the Knights of Columbus and in the Club Room; we also maintained our outreach through the food bank and community meals. Susan Nagtegaal led our choir with energy through thick and thin. The choir sang the Faure Requiem and have since felt empowered to reach out and invite people in the community to come sing with them; A children's choir is starting to form and you will hear them again on Palm Sunday; We've had two Adult Education studies – one on the Creeds and another on Emerging Christianity; Though it had to be re-scheduled, we had another successful Variety Sale and of course the ladies of the Craft group celebrated their 25th Anniversary. Last but not least, it's also been the year that saw our bells come down and touch the ground for the first time in over a hundred years. Their arrival home in December was filled with great drama. Now they are ringing tunefully as never before and never does a week go by without someone in the community stopping to talk to me about how good it is to have them back. For all these things and for all the people who made them happen, we give hearty thanks.

But as if all this wasn't enough, 2010 has also turned out to be an important year of planning and discernment. You need to know that, in this, we are not alone. When I talk to my various

friends and colleagues, it seems that almost every major parish in the Anglican Church of Canada has begun this kind of process.

For us it started in earnest a little over a year ago when we put out a parish questionnaire. The process continued with a series of town hall meetings led by a professional facilitator, Charlene Gordon. A great deal of information was collected by those meetings and she prepared a very helpful summary. Meanwhile, the diocese of Huron as a whole had prepared a strategic plan for the diocese and encouraged parishes to do the same. Therefore, at the May parish council meeting of this year a strategic planning committee was struck with the mandate of bringing together all the information that had been gathered and then prepare a strategic plan for the parish that would guide us for the next three years. Jane Kirkpatrick agreed to chair this committee and anyone in the parish who felt called to do this work was invited to come on board. Before long Jane had a committed group of people who were prepared to read through large amounts of information and meet almost every Saturday morning right through the summer.

The first task at hand was to take all the information in front of them and pull together key words that somehow not only captured the essence of who we are at St. James' but also who we feel called to be in the future. At the meetings I was able to attend, there was lively discussion and debate: one person would point out that we are a traditional church, a refuge from the crazy society out there - but then another would point out that we are by and large people who like to ask questions and engage issues, people who are open to new things. One person would point out that we are a historic parish - but then another would point out that we are a church that looks to serve the ever emerging needs of the community through outreach and care.

In the end, a Vision Statement started to take shape that did indeed reflect, not only who we have been, but who we feel called to be in the future. It was this:

St. James' Anglican Church...

Exploring, Sharing and Celebrating the love of God in the community in word and deed.

Notice that the key words chosen - Exploring, Sharing and Celebrating - are verbs. This was very deliberate. They are not adjectives that just describe who we are or who we have been. They are verbs - words that describe activity. And one thing is for sure, for anyone who decides to drop into the church on a Tuesday or Wednesday morning you'll see a dizzying amount of activity. Whether it's the food bank, the counters, the gathering of community news, memorial garden registrations, studying the Rule of Benedict or celebrating Holy Communion - it's activity that's very well described as Exploring, Sharing and Celebrating.

Over the next year, we're going to be talking a lot about this Vision. I plan to be writing and preaching quite a lot about exploring, sharing and celebrating the love of God. It's something we've been doing here at St. James' and it seems that parishioners feel that it's something we are called to do even better - especially in terms of being more visible in the wider community and in developing strong relationships and partnerships within the community.

I think that the Strategic planning committee have done a wonderful job, and I would like to thank them all – all 12 people who put in hours of work and discussion – the parish owes you a vote of thanks.

Finally, you may have noticed that there is another committee that has, over the past five months, been quietly working in the background. Don't let their quiet conversations fool you. It is now time for them to reveal the work that they have been doing. As you will see from their presentation today, the capital campaign committee is about to do a piece of work that will transform and prepare this parish for the next two generations. It is exciting, and it will capture your imagination.

No matter who is writing our history book 25 years from now, there is no doubt that the writer will have to mark 2010 as a major turning point for St. James' Church Stratford. They'll have to – because so many things happened in this year – things that tested us severely, but also things that we can lift up, celebrate and give thanks for.

God is, right now, finding new possibilities.

New ways for God's love to become known and shared are emerging.

Thanks be to God

The Rev'd Canon Dr. Lorne Mitchell