

Rector's Remarks
Annual Parish Meeting – Feb. 23, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to spend a few minutes reflecting with you on where we have been over the past few months and, more importantly, where I see us going – with God's help – in the months ahead.

I refer you to my written remarks in the Annual Report, which I encourage you to read at some point (not now!), if you haven't done so already. Having begun my ministry here so late in the calendar year, I can take very little, if any, credit, for the parish's accomplishments in 2019. I will say how impressed I was by the small-but-mighty band of faithful folk who kept everything running between Jeff MacKnight's retirement in May and my arrival in September. Thank you to our Wardens and Vestry for their leadership over the summer, as well as to our intrepid liturgical team who helped steer worship alongside a series of supply clergy who took Sunday services. St. Dunstan's did not have an official Interim period, with the consistent presence of one priest trained in shepherding parishes through periods of transition, and as a result you all had to patch things together to the best of your ability until I got here. Thank you!

I need to offer a special shout-out to our dedicated staff, Minister of Music Joey Arkfeld and Parish Administrator Kim Matthews, who worked so hard to get things ready for the new Rector and who have been instrumental in helping me acclimate to St. Dunstan's. And even though she is not here with us today for obvious reasons, we all owe a tremendous debt to my clergy colleague, The Rev. Cricket Park, Rector of the Church of the Redeemer, who took far too many funerals and interments over the summer. Kim had Cricket on speed dial, and she was a trouper to come lend a hand!

A word about the multi-talented Joey Arkfeld: When I arrived in September, Joey's title was Interim Music Director, having been hired shortly before Jeff's departure. Understandably, Jeff wanted his successor to be able to call his/her own Director of Music, for which I was very grateful. As you may be aware, it only took a few weeks of working with Joey for me to know that I wanted to offer him the permanent position, and I was delighted when he accepted. That was the best decision I've made so far! Joey is a great colleague – collaborative, positive, creative, and willing to go the extra mile for the good of the parish. He approaches music at St. Dunstan's not just as another gig, but rather as *ministry*, offered to the glory of God – which is why we changed his title *again* last fall, to Minister of

Music and Organist. We are so blessed by Joey's gifts, as we were reminded again today. Will you join me in thanking him?

Another decision that had to be made when I arrived concerned the number, timing, and character of worship services, and this is where I am going to focus my remarks today. First, a bit of context, for those who may not know the backstory: Several years ago, Jeff started a 9:00 a.m. Family Service geared toward children and parents. From what I understand it was very popular. It was relaxed and interactive and featured upbeat guitar music that appealed to a younger demographic. That service soon was a cherished part of St. Dunstan's parish life, supported by the ministry of Director of Christian Formation Sue von Rautenkranz and a host of musicians and other volunteers. I had the opportunity to supply at the Family Service a few times while I was a school Chaplain, so I know firsthand how lively and joyful it was.

However, over the years attendance at that service dwindled for a host of reasons, and by the time I was called as Rector it was all-but defunct. I am still piecing things together, but through many conversations I have an emerging sense of what happened. I will say that it is not unusual for even the most beloved of congregational traditions to die out over time, as people's priorities and energy shift. Parishes have life cycles, and change is inevitable.

Because we had so few children come last September, I made the decision, in consultation with the Vestry and the Liturgy Group, to offer one combined Sunday service at 10 a.m. *for the time being*. My goal in doing so was two-fold: first, energy begets energy, and I wanted a fuller congregation in order to bring life to our worship. Having just a handful of folks at a 9 a.m. service would be deadly. And second, it felt important to me to come together as one community. Far-too often parishes are split up into "sub-parishes" according to age and worship style preference. At the outset of a new pastoral relationship, that seemed unhealthy and counterproductive.

And so for the past several months we have all worshipped together under "one tent," so to speak, with mixed success. While I personally love seeing folks of all ages praising God together in one congregation, I also am increasingly aware that the current situation is suboptimal – especially for our families with young children. We have been blessed this year that our Seminarian, Robin Reed, has enthusiastically taken on the lion's share of "Children's Messages" preceding the sermon (thank you, Robin!), but that is still not the same as having a service tailored to the developmental needs of our youngest members.

On a related note, we also lack Christian Formation programs for children, which is a significant issue. To be frank: When young families stopped coming to Church, and when they stopped *pledging*, St. Dunstan's no longer had the resources – human or financial – to make those offerings possible. As I've said to a few of you before, it's a classic Catch-22. Thanks to Joey we now have a Youth Choir that meets on the first Sunday of every month, and I soon will be gearing up to teach our Youth Confirmation Class, but that is far from adequate.

The Very Good News is that over the past several weeks I have begun to hear from a few parents longing for the return of programming for children, youth, and families. I am really encouraged by that. I also have some more Good News to share: You may remember that I mentioned at the Town Meeting last month that we were looking for a designated gift of \$5,000.00 to help defray the cost of a very part-time Children's Christian Formation Coordinator to work with me to create robust offerings for the families in our congregation. I am delighted to announce that received not one but *two* very generous designated gifts, so now we can begin to dream and scheme about how best to invest those funds to develop appropriate children and family programs. Please join me in praying that we will be able to identify and attract the right person to help with this ministry, and please pray that God will raise up volunteers from within the parish to work with the paid professional to teach and lead. Without a broad base of parishioner support, the effort will fail.

There is still much that is unknown: Will Children's Formation take place on Sunday mornings while the adults are in worship? Will we go back to a dedicated hour when everyone is engaged in Formation at the same time? Is there a better day/time for families? And to paraphrase *Field of Dreams*, if we build a Children's Formation program, will they come?

My best answer at this point is "I don't know – but I'm willing and ready to find out." My vision is to develop Children's Formation while simultaneously exploring and piloting an occasional Family Service – perhaps not at 9 a.m., because I have heard from parents, loud and clear, that that's too early for their children. Once we have enough momentum and ***commitment***, then we can offer two services again, to provide everyone with choice. The catch is that this mustn't happen precipitously or impetuously – rather, it has to be organic and have the demonstrated commitment of the whole parish (not just young families).

The process in which we are engaged right now is iterative: it requires deep listening, discernment, and a willingness to take risks. We must be willing to fail, and fail boldly! It also requires a willingness to show up. While Children's Ministry is not the only initiative on which your Vestry and I are working, it is among our highest priorities – along with Outreach/Social Justice and Strategic Planning for Church Growth.

The most important thing is that St. Dunstan's continue to be a place where we know Christ and make Him known, in order to help bring about God's Kingdom here on earth.

I'll stop here, for now, but just know that this is just the beginning of a longer conversation. Please, please, please: read the *Trailblazer* every week for updates, and when you are solicited for input in the coming weeks, please respond. It takes all of us, every member of this parish – from little Riley to the most Senior among us – working together to help make God's dream for this place a reality.

Thank you all for your love of our Lord and of St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church. That's really all we need to accomplish great things for Jesus.

May God continue to bless you all.