

2019 Annual Meeting Presentation

My sisters and brothers, tomorrow on March 1, 2019, we will celebrate a full year of ministry together as Parish and Rector. Last year, at our 2018 Annual meeting, even before our ministry officially began, I spoke with you at the Annual Meeting about some hopes and dreams I had for St. Monica's. At that gathering, I outlined the challenges we might face in order to serve effectively in an ever-changing culture, in the 21st century. I said, "We will need to re-focus our efforts on four mission initiatives: (1) Discipleship, (2) Radical Welcome and Hospitality, (3) Service – Mission/Ministry, and (4) Evangelism. I want to first take a few moments to share with you, what God has been doing, is doing now, and will do in the coming months and years, through this ministry we share as God's people of St. Monica's Episcopal Church.

Discipleship

Last year I said, St. Monica's must be committed to discipleship and so, we have renewed efforts to offer more Christian formation and study opportunities. We ARE growing in a "deeper love and commitment to Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Through the Rector's Bible Study, Friday Morning Bible Study, Wednesday Men's Bible Study, Confirmation/Reception classes, Sunday morning Adult Formation Study, the amazing new Sunday school program, the upcoming Lenten Soup and Study series, and the Day Long Lenten retreat, there have been and there will be multiple opportunities available for each of us, to learn more about this faith in Jesus Christ that we claim. Likewise, there are many new ways for us together, to explore the richness, depth, beauty, and history of the Episcopal tradition. I want to encourage each of you to live a committed life of discipleship, by making time for your own Christian formation by opening yourself to the many opportunities for Christian education. Through that discipline, we all will continue to grow in our love and commitment to Christ, and each other.

Radical Welcome and Hospitality

Last year I said, St. Monica's must be committed to a renewed kind of Radical Welcome and intentional hospitality extended to all who come here seeking grace. Early in our ministry together, a new team was formed called the "Radical Welcome Team," and at the same time, each of us was reminded that we are to be "Ambassadors for Christ." Through the intentional work of this team and each one you, new people are finding their spiritual home in our parish family. Our Radical Welcome Team reports that over the last 11 months, we have 70+ new people actively taking a part in our community, and joining St. Monica's.

This ministry team contacts each new visitor to St. Monica's and then, the team invites them to attend a quarterly gathering that Terri and I host in our home. From there, the staff assists new folks to make a commitment to join St. Monica's. We are seeing a significant increase in our weekend attendance. Right now we are running up nearly 50 people in all three services year to date over last year, and up plus 30 people this year, over a last four-year average. Last week, at our third newcomers "Circle of Friends" event my wife and I host at our house each quarter, we had 21 new people in attendance. That is incredible! Intentional welcome and hospitality will continue to

create more opportunities for new people, to grow in a deeper love and commitment to Jesus Christ, by walking this journey of faith with all of us.

Service – Local Mission

Last year I said, St. Monica's must be committed to continuing this parish's tradition, of loving our neighbors and serving our neighbors, by being Christ's hands and feet in the world. Today, we continue our local mission efforts through our hands-on Baby Basics ministry, by providing diapers for economically challenged families, thus freeing up funds for families to purchase food, rent, and other necessities. We continue our mission to support the Guadalupe Soup Kitchen in Immokalee, whereas a ministry team travels each month, to feed those living in poverty and want.

We have started a new local mission team, serving in partnership with *Meals of Hope* through which, our team of ministers distributes needed food for local families struggling to make ends meet. At that last mission, the team served 126 multi-ethnic and economically challenged families trying to work and live in Naples. There are many needs of our neighbors in our neighborhood, and thus, there are new mission opportunities in which, we can be involved. I am convinced that in the future, God will reveal even more ways we can go outside these four walls, and serve as the hands and feet of Christ for our hurting world.

Evangelism

Last year I said, St. Monica's must be committed to sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with our neighbors. Our baptismal promises are that we will, "by word and example, to share the Good News of God in Christ." We are doing that very well my sisters and brothers. St. Monica's is growing, not because of a new priest, or even because of better programs, or even because of our awesome liturgy and music. St. Monica's is growing because people are seeing God's transformative love overflowing in us, and they are curious, and they want to join God's movement.

As God calls us forward in ministry together, we must continue to be evangelists. I know that word is frightening for Episcopalians, but we have to remember, there is only one priest, and yet there are 250+ people in this parish. We all promised to God in our baptismal covenant that we will be Ambassadors for Christ, evangelists in the world, and bearers of Good News.

In 2018, when I was at General Convention as a Deputy representing our diocese, I attended an incredible event of renewal celebrated by the Episcopal Church, where thousands gathered for song, celebration, worship, fellowship, and transformation. The Presiding Bishop billed this event as "An Old Fashioned Revival – Episcopal Style." I am convinced that we are experiencing revival in the Episcopal Church, and we are experiencing revival right here at St. Monica's. We must continue to invite our friends to come experience God's grace and love in this community.

Going Forward

As we look back on how God is "Making things new" in this community, we cannot readily forget that we are still in a period of ministry transition. I know it seems longer, but Terri and I (and now Erica) have only been with you for one year. There are still some operational opportunities and challenges that we need to address, in order to put down a solid foundation on which, we can grow! We are currently transition two

staff positions. Our new Comptroller is in place and has already hit the ground running. I am currently interviewing candidates for our next Parish Administrator, and I hope to have that position filled very soon. Doing the hard work of transition, realignment, and foundation building though, will not hold us back from looking to the future God has in store for us. Many of you have shared your own individual desires and hopes for St. Monica's and yet, we need to spend some intentionally praying and listening and discerning God's call on this community in the next five years.

Discernment is different from the strategic planning, in which many of us engaged in our prior careers. Discernment is a practice of holy listening; prayerful listening for God to guide us, and we do that in community. In Hebrews we hear this wisdom, "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." In order to understand where God is leading us, we need to practice together discernment, so we might be clear where, how, what and yes, why God is calling us forward.

As I have spent time with many of you, I have heard your hopes expressed for the future of St. Monica's. I have heard dreams of a new building, a new organ, new local ministries, and many other expectations. Discerning God's call requires us all to set aside our own individual desires and hopes, and to seek what God desires and hopes for this parish. Let me share with you some of those expressed hopes and dreams and expectations.

Hopes and Dreams Expressed

(1) Our parish hall and administrative building is in need of quite a bit of work, to address deferred maintenance. (2) We have a relatively small mortgage, and those payments cost the church \$24,000 annually, which takes away from ministry investment. (3) There is a desire for more outreach and for targeted ministry initiatives. (4) We are growing at a rate that requires more time and personnel than we currently have available. (5) There is a desire to finish the worship space project that began years ago, but ended prematurely due to the economic downturn.

All of these desires and hopes are out there, and I am sure there have many more, which have gone unexpressed, and/or I have not mentioned them here. Many of us in our careers have been a part of major projects and initiatives and we all know that prioritization and clarity of purpose go hand-in-hand. The practice of discernment makes it possible for us to not only prioritize these hopes and dreams, but it helps us to clarify God's purpose and mission for this particular community, so that the dreams which do pursue, actually relate to what mission God has in store for us and thus, come to holy fruition.

Some of these hopes and dreams will need more time, more resources, and a solid well laid out plan, which cannot be undertaken overnight. Diocesan policy requires that one of the major hopes require us to have 1/3 of the project money on hand first, 1/3 in committed pledges, and only 1/3 may be financed. In time, if we have a solid operational and financial foundation and with God's help we can do the impossible, but we must know our purpose and how that project fits into the purpose of anything we do. However, we do not need to be discouraged, because God can easily increase the chances for us to double the size of St. Monica's right now (on our current campus) by our merely adding one additional worship service to our Sunday schedule.

We can double the size of St. Monica's with one additional service on Sunday. Did you know that last year, we exceeded our building capacity on Easter Sunday with our 9:30 am service? We had 320 people and our seating capacity is only 237. This year, we have already added another service on Easter Sunday to our schedule, which will allow us to accommodate new people, and to increase our capacity. Additionally, the staff is already doing initial planning to add a fourth service at 11:15 am on Sunday beginning in Autumn 2019. I know new facilities are something we dream of, but we need to have solid parish operations, with sufficient staff to accomplish the work, and we must have a growing discipleship program in place, before we even begin that conversation. We must have a clear purpose for any edifice we build, long before we begin it. But we do not have to wait for the future to begin discerning God's mission call for St. Monica's, we can begin dreaming of growth and ministry expansion right now.

We can begin now

God is doing a new thing in our midst. Already this year, we have had four confirmations, six receptions, one renewal, and one baptism during the last bishop's visit. We need to continue to grow disciples in the Episcopal Church tradition. We are once again in new ways moving out of the four walls into the community with hands and feet to bring Christ to our neighbors. We have begun the hard work of establishing a strong financial and administrative foundation for growth and sustainability, but there is much more work we need to do, and we can begin now.

I want to challenge the congregation and vestry in 2019, to begin an initiative to pay off our \$136,000 mortgage in one year. We can do it. Did you know that if the 143 pledgers (not to mention those who do not pledge yet) gave only \$18.50 more each week (that is less than five Venti Lattes at Starbucks), we would pay off our mortgage in only 12 months? Did you know that without a mortgage payment, we would free up approximately \$24,000 a year in our budget, which we can use for mission and ministry initiatives, staff enhancement, and deferred maintenance investment. What do you say, let's begin that soon! Hang on, don't write a check yet, there will be more information to come.

Next, I want us to begin an intentional process of Holy Listening. We will begin with a simple ten-question survey that soon will be sent to all parishioners through our Constant Contact email system. The survey will ask, "What are the top five priorities you believe God has for St. Monica's in the next 5 five years?" "What of these five priorities are you willing to invest your time, talent, and treasure?" We will also ask some general demographic and participation questions.

Next, I am dreaming of a daylong parish meeting, where we can spend quality time together, both in small groups and as a large group answering questions like, "What has defined us as a community," "What defines us now," and "What is God calling us to become." From the survey and community gathering, we will be able to utilize that information from our practice of discernment, to give us the pathway on which, God is calling us to proceed.

My hopes for our Next Phase of Mutual Ministry together

My hopes and dreams for our ongoing ministry are as follows: (1) We will continue SHARE ministry TOGETHER, by raising up new leaders in each ministry, because ministry cannot be done by one person or by one small group alone, it takes all of us. (2) We will

continue to focus on new ways to gather and worship together, because we can grow extensively within our existing campus. (3) We will continue to focus on growing together in a deeper love and commitment to Jesus Christ, and with each other, because that is the purpose of being in Christian community in the first place. (4) We will continue to focus on going outside our four walls together, doing local mission in our neighborhoods (being hands and feet of Christ), because that is what Jesus commands us to do. And (5) we will continue to focus on inviting our friends and neighbors to experience God's love and grace found in this incredible community, because that too is what Jesus commands us to do.

How might we do this? Simply, we will: (1) Pray together, worship together, minister together, and play together, and (2) We will shift our mission focus here at St. Monica's from mere maintenance and status quo, to a renewed vision and mission as disciples, who are growing in a deeper love and commitment to Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. My dear sisters and brothers, God is calling us to a new day. The question is, "Can we do it?" I believe we all know the answer, "Yes we can, with God's help!!"