

“Building a City on a Hill”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
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Earlier this year, a team of trusted parishioners began looking into the feasibility of Hickory Neck having a day care or a pre-school, preferably one that would operate on a sliding fee scale, in order to provide quality childcare at an affordable price for people of lesser means. This work was authorized by the Vestry, who were responding to the vision discerned by the parish last year.

The first step in determining feasibility is gauging the need in the community. If there is no need, then there is no reason to proceed. Last Tuesday, the Vestry received a preliminary report from Paula Simmons, De Fehrenbach, Jean Hancock, Stephanie Delk, and Joy Tanner. Their research so far has demonstrated a major need for childcare, especially for those least able to pay. Allow me to share with you some of their findings.

In 2007, 147 pre-school children were admitted to Head Start in James City County. In order to be eligible for this program, a family’s income must be under the federally mandated poverty line, which for a family of four is set at \$21,200 per year. However, insufficient funds were available for all eligible applicants to be admitted. Last year, 25 children were placed on a waiting list for Head Start. No funding increases adequate to expand the program are expected for the upcoming school year. So that waiting list will almost certainly grow longer.

These 25 children are the tip of the iceberg. In James City County, 64% of children under the age of six have working parents. Many of these families prosper and can afford to send their children to one of the many quality care providers in our

community. However, even for families of sufficient means, childcare can be difficult to obtain, because there is a serious shortage of available capacity.

For families of lesser means, the cost of available services puts a terrible strain on their household budget. For instance, two parents, each working 40-hour weeks at \$12 per hour, will earn a pre-tax income of \$48,000. The cost of daycare in James City County ranges from \$6,240 to \$7,680 annually per child, which represents 13% to 19% of their pre-tax income. If that working family has two pre-school children, they would spend somewhere between 26% and 38% of their income on childcare. We do not know precisely how many families earn an income that is above the poverty level yet below a level that makes childcare affordable. However, the data we have gathered indicates that sufficient need exists to warrant further study.

The Vestry has asked our team to take the next step and explore the financial side of feasibility. We hope to know by the end of the summer whether or not we can offer high quality care at a reduced rate for families of lesser means. We intend any facility we open to be self-sustaining, and to that end, we will be exploring grant opportunities for operating capital to get us started.

The Feasibility Team currently advocates a hybrid model that would include a pre-school component, along with daycare opportunities that would extend services into the early morning and late afternoon hours. This will allow greater flexibility for wage workers who have less flexibility with their schedules. It would also enable us to serve people who live farther away from Hickory Neck. This is an ambitious plan, and there are many unanswered questions, but I believe we are on the right track.

Of course, our current facilities are proving increasingly inadequate for our own growing needs, much less those of others. Our Sunday School classrooms are operating at or near capacity. It is not uncommon for multiple meetings and classes to occur simultaneously, and large-scale fellowship events, even with our multi-use chapel, are a great challenge to pull off, especially without the benefit of a commercial-grade kitchen. So another team, at the request of the Vestry, has been exploring the construction of another building to help better accommodate these needs.

Under the leadership of Aaron Small, this team of Kristin Baum, Donna Casanave, Melissa Casheros, Don Seeterlin, and Rebecca Zoellner, has analyzed local growth projections to gain some sense of what our future needs as a parish might be, and what type of building would best meet those needs at the lowest possible cost. We are still in the conceptual phase of planning. Nothing has been drawn on paper, much less inscribed in stone, but here is what seems both possible and necessary:

A single-story structure with a footprint of 7,000 sq. ft., which for purposes of comparison is approximately 30% larger than the New Chapel. This structure would be expandable, in case more space was needed later on.

This 7,000 sq. ft. building would be divided into several parts, including:

A commercial-grade kitchen of approximately 800 sq. ft., which is about the floor space of the Historic Chapel

A 4,000 sq. ft. Parish Hall, which could dine 200 people.
The combined area of the Nave and Narthex is less than 4,000 sq. ft.

Six or seven dual-use classrooms, each approximately 300 sq. ft, capable of accommodating both Sunday School and daycare/pre-school classes of about ten students each.

66 additional parking spaces

Restrooms and ample storage space for chairs, tables, etc.

This structure could be attached to the New Chapel on the southeast corner in such a way as to allow natural light easy access to our worship space. The estimated cost of the building is \$1.4 million. The total cost of the project, including site work and furnishings, would be approximately \$2 million.

I suspect some of you may be quietly questioning my sanity. \$2 million is a lot of money, especially when we are already carrying about half-million dollars of debt. Allow me to remind you, though, of where we were five years ago, when started talking seriously about a New Chapel.

Our annual pledge and plate income was \$187,812. Today, that figure has risen to \$372,081, an increase of 98%. Our average Sunday attendance in 2003 was 118. Last year, it was 212, an increase of 80%. In 2004, when we held a capital campaign to raise funds for a new chapel, the initial phase of the campaign yielded \$823,000, which later grew over the course of three years to more than \$1.25 million. When we launched our capital campaign in 2004, we were already holding a quarter-million dollars in debt, from the 1998 Parish House expansion and renovation, and the acquisition of land we needed to build new facilities.

Everything has doubled – our operating income, our attendance, our debt load, our square footage under roof. Everything has doubled, except for the size of the project we're contemplating, which is only 25% larger in cost than what we just accomplished.

There is, at present, no firm timetable for the construction of this proposed new building. There are simply too many unanswered questions. There are variables beyond our control or prediction, such as the health of the economy, which in turn will impact the pace of occupancy in the neighborhoods adjacent to our campus. The conversation has

just begun, and will continue, but I want to bring you in on the ground floor of this new adventure, and I promise to keep you posted as we sharpen our plans.

I know the apprehension some here may feel. I feel it myself. These are major undertakings. But we are Christians. We are a people of faith. This is what we do. We look at the needs and discern their importance and urgency. We wisely weigh the options of how those needs might be met. We share information. We listen. We trust each other, and sometimes, we have to wait.

God believes in us, and so do I. I hope you believe in us, too. Be patient. Be at peace. We have received a vision to be a city on a hill, shining forth the light of Christ. What I've shared with you today is the latest thinking on how we can fulfill that vision, at least in part. Or more accurately, I've told you what tools we need to facilitate our ministry moving forward. Because a vision isn't about institutions or buildings; a vision is about ministry, about helping people who need it. And a daycare/pre-school will help people who need it, and a new building will make that ministry, and all of our other ministries, work better to the glory of God.