

Annual Parish Meeting  
Rector's Address  
9 December 2007

In years past, it has been my privilege to rise on this occasion and remind you of the great accomplishments which have brought us delight over the preceding year. Such events witness to God's work through the parish, and they also reflect our faithfulness to God and His mission for our parish. Certainly, we have much to celebrate this year.

Both our Fall Festival and the Relay for Life effort spearheaded by our youth broke records yet again. Between the two of them, over \$20,000 net were raised to help the homeless, the hungry, the homebound, and the sick, especially those who suffer from cancer. Our support for Mother Lauren and her missionary work with the people of the Sudan continues, again with our Youth leading the way. 2007 also saw something new in our missionary efforts, at least during my tenure, when Rick and Bunky Garfield went to Belize as medical missionaries, hauling a huge load of supplies and educational materials given by you, our parishioners.

Our entire Outreach effort has blossomed. In addition to raising funds and contributing materials -- all of which takes careful planning, along with much time and energy -- more and more people are offering themselves to those in need through their personal presence. Again, our youth lead us by doing a variety of activities that take them beyond their comfort zones and into direct contact with the most vulnerable of our society. We also have several people who provide transportation, counsel, and a host of others service directly to the homeless and to the homebound. A few parishioners go directly to jail on a regular basis to offer spiritual guidance and job skills, both of which give inmates an opportunity for a better future upon their release.

Of course, compassion begins at home. We continue to care for each other with astounding ferocity. Some weeks, it seems as if I can hardly enter a hospital room without bumping into a parishioner already there with Communion or a prayer shawl. Sometimes, I get there first, but only a few minutes pass before a familiar face enters with a smile to cheer, a shoulder to cry on, or a listening ear, whichever is needed. It makes me proud, these little rendezvous, and your presence is a great blessing for those who receive such visits. No doubt, it pleases God greatly to see how we love one another. In fact, that may be among the greatest evangelical witness we can hope to offer. Hospital staff and perfect strangers have remarked to me, "Just who ARE you people?"

This brings to mind a little story about a parishioner, who you may remember some serious trouble with her sinus surgery a few weeks back. When she returned home from hospital, several people attempted to call her to arrange meals or check on her condition. Most of those calls, however, went to the wrong number. Evidently, there was a typographical error in their phone listing in the parish roster. The calls intended for our parishioner were flooding into someone else's home. To her credit, this stranger gently corrected our parishioners, but after a few days, she called our office and told

Hope, "I believe you've given out a wrong number for one of your members." And with kind curiosity, the lady inquired, "What kind of church ARE you that people call so much when someone has been sick?"

I don't remember what Hope said, but if I had spoken to this person, I would have told her, "It's the kind of church that does beautiful, bountiful receptions for occasions both happy and sad. It's the kind of church that loves to celebrate God and each other. It's the kind of church that's alive with the desire to know and be known, and that desire does not go frustrated for anyone who puts forth a modest effort to connect with others. It's the kind of church that graciously sends its rector on sabbatical, and warmly welcomes him home, and in the meantime, helps a fine young priest become even finer." And then I would send her a copy of the written ministry reports you've received today, and I would ask her -- as I ask you -- to take twenty minutes to read it and just marvel in awe at the breadth and depth of ministry offered by the people of Hickory Neck.

My greatest dilemma, standing before you each year during this meeting, is knowing where to stop. We enjoy such an embarrassment of riches that inevitably a key piece gets inadvertently excluded. Be assured that lack of mention does not correlate with lack of appreciation.

Apart from our regular rhythm of ministry, a few things happened this year that merit special notice. First of all, our visioning process yielded authentic discernment about God's intention for Hickory Neck moving forward. I preached a sermon in September that tried to distill the wisdom the Spirit poured into the parish through you. It was among the most difficult I have written, and I have nagging concern that it was terribly incomplete. Over time, I have realized that a true vision can hardly be encapsulated within words alone. Neither a sermon, nor a slogan will do.

A true vision gets lived out day by day, painted piece by piece, if you will. And the words merely guide us. Words do give us a vital standard by which to measure our aspirations and our behavior. So please never forget: "We are a city on a hill, shining forth the light of Christ." But never presume that the vision ends there. The biblical image we strive to become cannot achieve its fulfillment through eloquent words, no matter how fervently uttered. Instead, we must take this image to heart, each of us and all of us, until we begin to live the vision. Opportunities to do so are numerous and will increase. I encourage you to be a part of it.

In the midst of all this visioning, plenty of people have been busy on more down-to-earth projects. Our historic organ has been fully renovated, and we hope by the end of January, fully restored with the replacement of a rank of pipes lost long ago in the life of our hundred-year-old instrument. When we realized just how bad things were, the word went out, and the congregation responded with immense generosity, raising \$20,000 in a matter of months. We can already hear the difference.

When we have pressing financial needs in other areas, it may seem foolish to some that we would spend so much getting our organ back to proper working order, but I

believe strongly that great musicians ought not be limited by their apparatus, and we have a great musician in Ed Godshall. We also have three great choirs that desperately need a functioning organ. Yes, three choirs: the Parish Choir at 9:00; the Choral Scholars at 11:15; and the congregation itself, which can make this place ring like a bell anytime you feel like it. Worship is at the heart of who we are as a community of faith, and music is so important to worship, I could hardly begin to explain in the time I have here. So please accept my thanks for a job well done, and enjoy the roar of the organ, leading us in our praise to God.

There has also been another restoration effort going on this year. We have poured tens-of-thousands of dollars into making our Historic Chapel stronger, safer, more comfortable, and more gorgeous than ever before. Again, it may be arguable we could have held off, but trust me. We knew it was bad before we got started, and once we got started: Lord, have mercy, we learned how bad it was. Approximately 4,000 services over a 20 year period, along with 24/7/365 access, can wear down any building, especially one so old. Once work on the historic chapel is completed, we will transfer our new weekly 7pm Youthcarist into that space. Though designed for youth, anyone can attend, and if you've been hankering for a little time in the historic chapel, this would be a great opportunity.

Again, I urge, I implore, I beg you -- read those written reports. I'm just skimming the surface here. Hickory Neck is healthy because it remains committed to its core purposes: worship and ministry. However, there are always challenges to be met, and obstacles to be overcome, and I would like to spend a few minutes talking with you about where we seem to be struggling as a parish.

Yesterday marked the fourth month that I have been back from sabbatical, and over that relatively brief period of time, I have sensed a deep anxiety in the parish. I cannot say why, but I have some ideas. We have recently undergone two major transitions as a congregation, and neither of those transitions is complete.

First, we grew. Fast. Really fast. Maybe not as fast as we wanted, but as fast as God gave us to grow, we grew. In five years, our average Sunday attendance more than doubled, from about 100 to over 200. As we grew, we changed. It became harder to put a name with every face, even for Ann and me, and that can be disturbing. The nature of relationships often changed, and the threat of cliques arose, though I think we've largely avoided that. Cliques, by the way, are not merely an adolescent method to exclude people according to some arbitrary standard. Cliques are primarily adaptive. Cliques are how people naturally cope with social systems that exceed their abilities. In other words, you can't be best buddies with 500 people. 200, maybe you've got a shot; 500, no way. And the same goes for me.

My role in the parish has changed as we have grown. Growth breeds complexity, and complexity requires time for careful planning and preparations. Events and processes that can be done almost spontaneously in a smaller group need greater energy to happen in larger groups. That energy has to come from someplace, and it usually gets

diverted away from individual relationships. That shift in relationships can create resentment, and resentment is almost always the product of unfulfilled expectations. So allow me to speak the truth in love, and share with you that I never came here to be anybody's best friend. I've already got one, and her name is Stephanie.

I'm sorry if that surprises or disappoints you, but to ask me to be everybody's buddy is to ask the impossible. I came here, first and foremost, to serve Jesus by serving you as priest, pastor, preacher, teacher, and leader. I do it as best I can. I try hard to be accessible and friendly and sincere and supportive. I sometimes fail, and for that, I ask forgiveness. I do not feel that the expectations of the parish are unreasonable at the present time. However, I do feel that there are an increasing number among us who fail to realize that as our parish changes, my role by necessity changes, and therefore your expectations of me also need to change.

There have been many other inevitable changes that have accompanied our growth. People who once held great influence have found their power diluted somewhat, as new people with new ideas joined the parish and emerged as leaders. In fact, fully half of the existing Vestry was elected after less than two years in the parish. With new ideas come new initiatives. Even for me, it can be hard to keep up with everything that's going on. It can be easy to feel lost and get tired in the whirlwind we call Hickory Neck, no matter how exciting and life-giving it can be.

Along the way, we saw the need for a new chapel, and we built it together. Literally, dozens of people gave input about everything from the layout to the lighting fixtures to the altar furniture. No one dominated the process, and yet we kept to a tight schedule and an even tighter budget, finishing up less than one-tenth of one-percent over budget. However, the new chapel isn't the historic chapel, and some of us feel the pain of that difference more than others.

Between these two transitions -- one of size; another of space -- some people have gotten squeezed out of our parish. What I mean by that is that an unusually large number of people have drifted away to the periphery of our parish. You may not have noticed, but I have.

Above my desk hangs a charcoal sketch given to me by the staff of the Cathedral of St. Philip, when I left there to come here. On one side, there are many sheep basking in the light. On the other side, separated from the rest by a panel of matting, is a single sheep surrounded by darkness. I notice when sheep go missing from this flock: maybe not as quick as I should, but as quick as I can.

Right now, about two-dozen families are on my lost sheep list. Once fairly regular in worship and ministry, we now hardly ever see them. I am following up with them as fast as I can. Some will not take my calls and will not return my calls. Of those I have contacted, some have schedules that prevent them from being as present as they once were. Some were disaffected by the changes wrought by our growth, fell out of the habit of worship, and find it difficult to return. Some, having fallen out of the habit, feel

shame, which I wish they wouldn't, but they do. Some people have returned to St. Martin's, now that that parish has stabilized under the leadership of a new rector. Some people have left this year because of theological controversies that afflicted the Episcopal Church for several years.

When people get squeezed, we may be tempted to cast blame and make accusations of negligence against the leadership; the leadership can also be tempted to make similar accusation against the parish. We are tempted to do so because blame gives the illusion of control and the hope of closure. Negligence can be fixed. But there are realities at play here which no one can fix; realities which we have no reason to deny.

There are those who simply either prefer or need a small church environment to thrive. Such a preference or need does not make a person weak or inadequate in any way. It is simply who they are. We are no longer a small church. In fact, according to statistics gathered by the national church, Hickory Neck is larger than 85.7% of the Episcopal congregations in the United States, according to membership and average Sunday attendance. We cannot offer a small church experience. We strive to mitigate that reality in various ways, primarily through small groups, but this parish has gotten much larger over the past five years, and I don't think we want to repent of that.

For others, Hickory Neck was closely tied to their experience of the historic chapel. Prior to our recent restoration efforts, we offered worship there regularly, but at an early hour. I hope that once our restoration efforts are complete, our new Youthcarist will offer a haven where those who miss the historic chapel most can find solace and worship God. Again, apart from these efforts to mitigate the effects, little can be done.

During the same period that people have been "squeezed out" of the parish, the number of new members joined has declined. I attribute this to cluster of factors, which includes slower growth in the surrounding area. Between the decline of new members joining, and the number of people who have departed from regular participation in the life of the parish, our attendance figures and our membership numbers have not grown as much in 2007 as they have in previous years. In fact, attendance is slightly down, by approximately 3%, which I believe is at least partly due to the excitement and curiosity generated by the new chapel last year, when we saw extremely high attendance throughout the summer months.

These factors, combined with the stress we feel from the change that comes with growth, has led to a noticeable increase in the anxiety of the parish. The anxiety erupts in a variety of ways that are often hurtful, though usually not harmful. The anxiety may not be part of a person's conscious awareness, or it may be attached to people and things that have little to do with the actual cause of the anxiety. Perhaps you sit there baffled as to what I am talking about, but deep inside you're sitting on a big ball of anxiety the size of Texas. Maybe it has nothing whatsoever to do with the parish, but there are things going on in your family life or at work or with your health. Maybe worries about the economy or the childish partisanship of our public discourse add fuel to the fire. Whatever the case, the anxiety level here is up.

If you disagree, fine. I actually hope you're right, and that I'm wrong. If you think I'm trying to psychoanalyze the parish, I think you are mistaken, at least about my intentions. Some may think that I am trying to deflect justified criticism, but if anyone here has come to me directly -- not through the gossip grape vine, but to me directly -- with a complaint or criticism, and feels that I didn't engage, didn't listen, didn't respond with Christian kindness -- I need to hear from you this week, because I desire healing and reconciliation with you. But many of you agree with me, I know, because I've talked with you about it. So presuming for a moment that our anxiety level is up, what do we do about it?

Well, first we name it for what it is, and I've just done that. Then we have to own it, not deny it, and that's the work we all have to do together. Then we need to pray about it -- hard. Because all that stuff I mentioned in the first half of my address, all that wonderful ministry within and beyond the parish, nothing will stop that Godly work faster than free-floating anxiety just looking for a place to land. At its most basic, anxiety is the enemy of peace, and without peace in hearts, our witness will be weakened, because without peace, we will lack the courage to go forth and show forth the Gospel in our daily lives. Anxiety is a symptom of separation from God.

When we're anxious, we need to avoid the temptation to find the quick fix, which anxiety spurs us to do, because when you're anxious, you're in a big, big hurry not to be anxious anymore. Instead, we need to be patient and humble and wait on God together. And that last word, "together," is maybe the most important one, because waiting on God, keeping vigil, is something best done together. I've tried to keep vigil alone. It's hard to stay focused; hard to stay awake sometimes. But together, if we wait on God, our suffering will be redeemed, and our anxiety healed. So while we're all together, how about we take a moment and pray?

*[The prayer offered by the Rector was spontaneous and cannot be recreated accurately here.]*