

Rector's Report to the Annual Meeting

Last Sunday's Gospel was the story of Philip telling his brother Nathanael about Jesus. As you remember, Nathanael had some sort of prejudice against Jesus, or anybody north of Bethsaida—so he had considerable problems taking Philip seriously when Philip started saying great things about Jesus. Philip did the best thing possible. He didn't argue, he didn't make fun of Nathanael, he didn't yell or hit anybody. Instead, Philip said three words, words that I suggest can set a great direction for St. Nicholas' in the year ahead. Philip said to Nathanael, "come and see".

Come and see. Come and see Jesus and his Church. That's what we're about, and that's what we live out, week in and week out, here at St. Nicholas'. And if you want to say something about St. Nicholas' to your friends, there are no better words than Philip's—come and see.

We've had a lot worth seeing here at St. Nick's in the year just past, and there will be more to come. I want to talk a bit about that this morning and, in conjunction with the Annual Reports booklet you will receive at the Annual Meeting, give a bit of an overview of our life together in this wonderful place.

Looking back at 2008, there is so much I want to mention, so bear with me. Certainly one of the most important steps we took in the year just past was to bring Darryl Knapp on board full-time as Coordinator of Lay Ministries as well as organist/choirmaster. Darryl is a joy to work with, and his hard work and cheerful manner lay behind much of what we have accomplished, especially in the areas of communications and pastoral care, and both I and all of us owe him real vote of thanks. Darryl, thank you.

And while we're on the subject, the music program has both deepened and expanded in 2008. The addition of adult and youth handbell choirs, the youth choir, and such magnificent offerings as our Lessons and Carols Christmas program, as well as the regular Sunday offerings, have enriched our worship and our life together. Come and see. (Choir and musicians stand up.)

There is much more that is new at St. Nicholas'. We now have in place and working a comprehensive program for identifying and tracking Newcomers (it's not perfect yet, but we're getting there), a Pastoral Care Committee and a Bereavement group, to better remember and care for one another in times of crisis and need. Special thanks to Jane Wolf, Jane McAbee, Harris Kerr and the ECW for their work in this area. Also, remember the yellow "We missed you" cards in the pews to let folks know that we are thinking about them and miss them when they are not with us on Sunday. Finally, watch for more developments in this area—there is much more to do.

Further, thanks to the dedicated efforts of Jane Wolf and the Communications Commission, our parish web site is up and running and looking good—if you haven't checked it out lately, please be sure to do that—and pay special attention to the photo galleries. We have also posted the Parish Newsletter on line and supplemented it with a weekly E-Mail update. And we have made considerable strides in improving communications both throughout the parish and among parish groups.

And there's more: Our Parish Endowment Fund has been established and is receiving gifts. This is a true endowment, the principle of any gifts to the Fund will never be spent, but will be a perpetual source of support for the ministry and life of St. Nicholas'. You will be hearing more about this in the months ahead, but I do invite you to consider the Fund as you plan your estate giving.

An exciting new program is our Health Ministries, which is under the able leadership of Linda Jordan and Gwen Burns, and has the help and support of Margaret Williams, the Diocesan Coordinator for Health Ministries. This program has already had a real impact on our parish and our community by its several program offerings, the Blue Christmas service it sponsored last December, and individual nursing support for several parishioners. By the way, St. Nick's 2nd blood drive will be Sunday, February 8th, following the Eucharist; and your help is needed. Come and see.

Our outreach programs have also taken on greater scope and depth in 2008. Just to mention one project among many, the Angel Threads program, under the leadership of Greg Clark, has provided new clothes for over 175 people this year, and has bigger plans for 2009. Also, Deacon Tom Burns' retirement has freed him up for even more leadership in the area of outreach, and his work with area helping agencies, especially with the Thirty Degree Project in which many of us are involved, is quickly making St. Nicholas' one of the most active and involved churches in our community. If you have an idea about outreach, or would like to help with our ongoing ministries, please contact Tom or Greg. As with most everything else, still more is in the works. Come and see.

All of these and more—such things as our Blessing of the Animals service, book studies, EYC Group, and games night come to mind—are just getting started this year, and together all of these can help us recognize the depth of commitment, activity and innovation at St. Nicholas'.

And that's just the new stuff. Ongoing education programs like our Vacation Bible School and Christian Education classes for children and youth, overseen by Kristin Maguire, Allison Porter, Harris Kerr and their helpers, our EFM program, mentored by Will Morris and Deacon Tom, and the Adult Classes are all growing and thriving.

Chef Harris Kerr, along with Patsy Berry, Scott Marter, Mary Rogers and more, continue to make our Wednesday evening dinners and fellowship a wonderful family event week in and week out. Also, we continue, and have plans to deepen, our cooperation with Santa Maria and their Jubilee Center ministries; and we will be an ever-expanding part of the community of Midland churches through our support of the Midland Association of Churches. Come and see.

Our Episcopal Church Women also continue to be active and involved, both within the parish and the larger community. The St. Nicholas' cookbooks made their first appearance at November's successful Heavenly Holidays sale, and much more is planned for this year. Many thanks to all who have worked so hard for our ECW.

The list could go on and on, but I want to stop talking about this year with one final note. Our incredibly dedicated lawn crew, consisting of Jim and Laura Brown, Grey Bassinger, Corby Considine, Darryl Knapp, Scott Marter, and Robert Whitt, has retired after their third year of volunteer care for our parish grounds. Along with Teddy Stickney and many other volunteers, they have done a wonderful job of keep us looking great. Many, many thanks to all of you for your hard and important work.

Looking ahead to the coming year, the first thing to say is that we join the rest of our diocese in welcoming the Rev. Scott Mayer as our next Bishop, and we look forward to his leadership and to his friendship. Fr. Mayer will begin his work with St. Nicholas' early, leading a Vestry Retreat next month. Bishop Ohl and Sheila will most certainly be missed, but I am convinced that Fr. Mayer and his wife Kathy will do great things both for our Diocese and for our Parish.

Some of the things in store for us this year include St. Nicholas' sponsoring a speaking engagement from Phyllis Tickle, one of finest thinkers in the Church today, developing special relationships with parishes in both the Dominican Republic and the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth, additional initiatives in Adult Education, a deepening focus on outreach, and more. Come and see.

All of this—new, continuing, and projected, is built around our mission: “to reflect the love of Christ and to respect the dignity of all people.” This is what we are about, and this vision guides and informs all that we do.

The one note of tension is that a number of factors, including the current economic situation, have led to a bit of a financial crunch for this year, and we have had to budget both anticipated unpledged income and some funds from our carry-over cash from the last couple of years. We will need, and are counting on, your special help this year to pull us through and to help make all of these ministries possible.

Before I close, a few personal remarks. First of all, some very special thank you's—beginning with a word about your outgoing Senior Warden. Today, Will Morris completes his term on the Vestry; and he has served as Sr. Warden for the last two years, which covers both the time of my call to St. Nicholas' and my rookie year here.

Will has been of immeasurable help to me during these early months of my ministry as your Rector—he has been a faithful, helpful, open and very able leader; and both St. Nicholas' and I owe him a great debt of gratitude. Will, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

I have already mentioned my debt to Darryl and Deacon Tom, and I want to say that St. Nicholas' is served by one of the strongest staffs in the Church. Bob Poer is an excellent Parish Administrator (as well as a fine teacher) and Bob Bonnington, our pastoral associate, Sara Fritz, our bookkeeper and Elvira Sebian, our Sexton, as well as Fred and Fran Renz, Bob and Leona Jones, Patsy Berry and Billie Lanier, our office volunteers, all do a wonderful job for St. Nicholas'. Many thanks to all of you.

And I want to add one more word of thanks. This year, Jeff and Kathy Marugg will be leaving us and moving to Bangs, Texas. Their presence and their ministry have been a great gift to St. Nicholas' over the last four years—they have stood by us in all of our trials. Jeff's labor as Sr. Warden during the time of the split has been simply vital to the survival of our Parish; and Kathy's faithful leadership of the Altar Guild has made a huge difference. A very special word of gratitude to both of you, and we will miss you.

To close with a few personal notes: 2008 has been an exciting year for me. Our son, Will, graduated from the University of the South at Sewanee last May, happily beginning a new stage in the life of our family. And last Fall I began teaching at Midland College, an avocation I thoroughly enjoy. Also, while my central vocation is to be the Rector of Saint Nicholas', I do take great pleasure in my work in the Diocese—serving with Betty Gilmore on the Standing Committee, as a member of the Commission on Ministry, and as Webminister for the Diocese; and I am looking forward to serving this Summer, with Patsy Berry, as a Deputy to General Convention from our Diocese. Finally, while the last year has not brought the hoped for improvement in Kathleen's physical condition, we are slowly learning to cope with our new reality, and I want to say again how deeply Kathleen and I appreciate the care and support we have received, and will receive, in response to her illness. You have been wonderful to us during this difficult time, and we can only say again, "thank you".

It is truly a blessing and a gift to serve as your Rector; and I can joyfully say, with the Psalmist, that “my boundaries enclose a pleasant land, indeed I have a goodly heritage”. We have a wonderful calling to witness to the presence and love of Christ in our community, and I look forward to many years of shared life together.

Come and see.

May God Bless and Keep You All,

The Rev. James E. Liggett, Jr.

Rector