

## ***Rector's Report to the Annual Meeting***

Isn't that reading from I Corinthians that we just heard wonderful? It's a great place to begin this, my third Rector's Report to the Annual Meeting of Saint Nicholas' Church. Paul talks about love, Christian love, and he calls it a higher way than that of any and all other spiritual gifts. Love, Christian love, is both the goal and the destiny of every Christian person and of every Christian community. It's at the very heart of who we are and what we're about. Here, at Saint Nicholas', it is very real. That love has been both revealed and tested in the year just past; and it continues to shine through in so many ways. This is a place of love—and I want that idea to weave its way through this report.

We might as well begin with loss. 2009 was a hard year in many ways. Saint Nicholas' held ten funerals last year—far too many. We have lost some of our oldest and most faithful members, and we are all diminished by their passing. It's worth noting that two of these members, Ed Aldridge and Bob Jones, were combat veterans of the Second World War. We're running out of time to say 'thank you' to this watershed generation; and we should never overlook a chance to do that. We have also lost ten parishioners to moves and transfers; and that, too, hurts.

At the same time, in the midst of these losses, Saint Nicholas' has consistently revealed itself to be a place of love. The support and concern of the parish for the people and the families of those we have lost is overwhelming; and is a powerful witness to the depth and scope of the compassion and care of our parish. In the midst of our loss, we can celebrate and work always to enrich this.

But all has not been loss, far from it. 2009 was also a year of growth and of service; and there is so much to give thanks for. A host of events and programs—from the Consecration of our new Bishop, to several successful Blood Drives, to our continuing Blue Christmas service (courtesy of our Parish Nurse program), to our parish games times, to an overflowing Vacation Bible School, to the visit by Phyllis Tickle—and that's just a sample—these all point to an active, creative, and busy year.

At the same time, ongoing programs like Christian Education, EFM, Youth activities, ECW, Ushers, the Wednesday evening dinners by Harris and his many helpers, and so many more, have all grown and thrived in the year just past. One of the great strengths of our parish is an abundance of extremely able, willing, and committed leaders. We are truly blessed by the vast pool of talent in this place; and that shows.

Special note needs to be made here of our music program. Under the amazing leadership of Darryl Knapp, the Saint Nicholas' Choristers and our youth and adult handbell choirs have continued and expanded their wonderful offerings to the glory of God, to our common worship, and to our larger community. Such magnificent offerings as the Taizé service, our Lessons and Carols Christmas program, and the beautiful Sunday music, week in and week out, have enriched our worship and our life together.

But our attention is not just focused on ourselves. Not only are our outreach ministries showing great progress—more on this in a minute—but it also needs to be said that a truly significant number of you are personally and deeply involved in literally dozens of programs throughout the Midland area and beyond—programs that meet countless human needs and that affect, in one way or another, thousands of people. This service, also, is something we need to celebrate as a congregation, and to offer to God and his glory. It, too, reveals St. Nicholas' as a place of love.

Statistics don't tell the whole story, but they tell a part of it. Here are a few: Last year we presented seven adults for Confirmation, transferred in seventeen more, and celebrated five baptisms. Our Sunday attendance increased by an average of five people a week, in spite of our losses, and the Wednesday evening service, as well as our special services like Blessing the Animals, have all shown steady growth.

Our Endowment Fund, new this year, began 2009 with a balance of about \$2,600; and it has increased more than ten-fold to over \$27,000. Again, these statistics are not the whole story; but they are part of it, and a good part to hear.

Yet what gives all of this its unique, Saint Nicholas', flavor and aura is the special quality of the Christian community where it all happens. Never have I seen a congregation that enjoys itself and one another more than we do; never have I seen such a willingness by so many to do so much; and never have I seen such a general and deeply real compassion for one another as I do, daily, at St. Nicholas'. We have something very precious here, and it's well worth the effort it takes to make it happen and to keep it going. St. Nicholas' is a place of love.

And there is more to come. 2010 promises to be an exciting and important year for our parish. I want to mention just a few of the things on the horizon—there are lots more. The wonderful visit of Phyllis Tickle last Fall is just the first of what we hope will be a regular program of excellent guest speakers. Next month, the Rev. Dr. Jane Tomaine will offer a weekend Lenten series entitled "Strengthening Your Core" on Benedictine Spirituality for today's world. Dr. Tomaine is a nationally-known speaker on this topic and it promises to be an excellent and valuable time. Mark February 26 to 28 on your calendars.

Moving on, did you know that St. Nicholas' currently has twenty-three children under the age of sixteen on the rolls? We need to pay careful attention to these important people; and some exciting plans are in the works for our Christian Education program for children. I hope to have more information on this very soon.

Also, in just a couple of weeks, David Morrow, Bishop Mayer, and I will be taking a week-long trip to the Dominican Republic.

Although the trip has been planned for a couple of months, it takes on a special poignancy with the recent earthquake in Haiti. The Dominican Republic and Haiti are the two nations on the island of Hispaniola; and much of the Episcopal Church's relief efforts in Haiti is coordinated from the Diocese of the Dominican Republic. We will be attending their Diocesan Convention, visiting with Bishop Holguín, and taking a trip to our companion parish of St. Simon the Apostle in Puerto Plaza.

I plan on coming back with all sorts of pictures and ideas for developing this new relationship; and I hope it will be a major focus of our attention and of our outreach in the year ahead. There are all sorts of possibilities here; and I hope this is something that will spark the imaginations of many of you.

Which brings us to the next big deal for 2010. Beginning next Sunday, St. Nicholas' will add a second service at 11:30 AM. The service will be in Spanish or bi-lingual, depending on who shows up; and Doña Josie Rose will be the usual celebrant. It will, of course, be open to anyone who wants to attend. Santa Maria will cease holding services on its site; and our 11:30 service will replace them. Josie will continue her primary work as the Diocesan Hispanic Missioner for Midland; but she and Deacon Roland will be part of our Sunday mornings here at St. Nick's.

The present Food Panty will continue at its present location, and over the next year we will work together to make that the focus of the outreach ministry of St. Nicholas' and Santa Maria. The opportunities for mission outreach are both extensive and exciting.

In an attempt to answer some of the questions you have asked or may have about this change, I have included two documents in the Annual Reports.

One is a list of questions and answers that have come up over the last few months. It's taken from our parish blog. The second is a summary of the most recent round of transition plans that Josie and I have made. Also, Josie will be leading the Wednesday programs on February 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, to talk about both these changes and the Hispanic community in Midland. Doubtless there will be many additional things to consider as we proceed; but I am convinced that these changes will both strengthen Hispanic ministry in Midland and enrich St. Nicholas'. We welcome both Doña Josie and Deacon Roland to our parish, and look forward to having them with us. They will help us live out the love of Christ in this place.

One more matter needs to be mentioned, and that's our parish finances. The economic crisis of the last several months has hit us pretty hard, both in terms of our 2009 income and our pledges for 2010. We understand that many of us are simply hurting, and that that's the way it is and we have to make adjustments for this new and, we all hope, temporary reality. Fortunately, St. Nicholas' has some prudent operating reserves, and by using some of these, and by cutting our budget, we should be able to get through this difficult year with our ministries and programs intact. Still, things will be very tight; and we need your help as you are able.

That said, I want to move on to a few personal reflections—beginning with some thank-you's. Today, Jim Brown, Pool Webb and Scott Marter complete their terms as members of your Vestry. Each has made significant contributions to the life of St. Nicholas' over the last three years. Pool's work on the Vestry and on the Communications Commission have strengthened us in many ways. Scott's constant and extraordinary efforts in hospitality, the kitchen, our worship space, toting things around, and so much more have become invaluable. Jim has been an excellent Sr. Warden, and his presence, counsel and insight have been an important part of all that has gone well this last year.

Jim has also given hugely of himself in his care for our grounds and landscaping. Along these lines, I want to mention also the work of Nathan Williams, our Jr. Warden. It seems that our building has reached age 60 in people-years, and that all sorts of things have needed repair. This, plus two break-ins and a sometimes contrary computer network, have kept Nathan on his toes and in the building *a lot* in 2009. Jim, Scott, Pool and Nathan, would you stand for a moment please.

Thanks also to our excellent parish staff. Deacon Tom Burns, Darryl Knapp, Bob Poer and Linda Hill, our new Financial Manager, are a great blessing to me, and to all of St. Nicholas'. Their hard work really makes things happen, and you are well served by each and every one of them. Finally, I want to mention our office volunteers—Patsy Berry, Leona Jones, Fred and Fran Renz, Billie Lanier, and Debra Borgen. They make all the difference, and we couldn't operate without them. This is a wonderful place to work.

I want to conclude with a personal word. As I have said more than once, I both hope and expect that 2009 will be the worst year of my life. Kathleen's death has been devastating to me in ways I am only just beginning to realize. I want to say again how deeply I appreciate all of the help and support I have received and am receiving from you during this difficult time; and how I simply could not have made it this far without you. There is no way to express my gratitude for all you have done and are doing for Will and me. Thank you all, so very much. This is truly a place of love.

Recently, our Bishop created a Diocesan Vision Group, to look at our Diocese and to begin to imagine a new future. Along with Betty Gilmore and Doña Josie, I have been asked to serve on that Group. At our first meeting last week we were talking about some of the risks, challenges and difficulties we face; and Bishop Mayer said something that makes a good closing for this report.

The Bishop said that one thing that is at risk in our Diocese is our pride in being Episcopalians—that the controversies and publicity of the last few years have the potential, and in some cases the reality, of making us reticent, even embarrassed about being a part of this wonderful church—a church so rich with faith, tradition, courage, beauty, variety and openness. And this, reticence, the Bishop rightly said, must stop. Yes, we are often the first to ask hard questions and to move in new directions—we always have been. And, yes, the media loves to dump on us. We can't change that. But there is so much more to us than that; and we have every reason to be justly proud of who we are and what we are about. It is a good and a holy thing to be a faithful Episcopalian; and it is an especially good and holy thing to be a part of St. Nicholas' Church, (and to be Rector of St. Nicholas' Church). These are gifts from God, and they are to be cherished, and celebrated, and shared. This is a good and a holy place; it is a place of love.

May God Bless and Keep You All,

The Rev. James E. Liggett, Jr.

Rector