

“Where there is no vision, the people perish” Proverbs 29:18

- I. Our annual meeting Sunday is a “check in” moment- an opportunity to take a time out from our normal Sunday patterns and to focus on the health of the congregation.

It is a time to review the past year and to look ahead into the year now begun.

And I offer these observations each year not as a person whose opinion, passions or concerns are any more important than any of us who call this church our spiritual home, but as one called to be the pastor and priest and more importantly, as the one who stands in the midst of our common life. From that vantage point, I can hear the voices, the harmony, and sometimes the dissonance as we sing, as individuals and together. And now that I am presiding at my 26<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting, I also have some perspective to offer.

- II. In the published Annual Report, I suggest that you begin at the end, by reading the “Year in Review” section. It always amazes me to take a step back and remember all that happened in the past year.

Some of the highlights of 2011 featured annual moments of wonderful, spiritual significance like Christmas and Easter. There were also highlights in each area of our common life (represented in our parish structure by our commissions: Education, Children and Youth, Fellowship, Preschool, Pastoral Ministry, Outreach Ministry, and Worship).

And there are always some moments which seem to stand out and are a bit unique. Two such events involved our clergy- the celebration of my 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary as Rector in June and the farewell and thankyou picnic for Mother Robyn Szoke and Deacon Anne Flynn in September.

- III. We have good reason to be thankful as we gather this Sunday and look back on 2011. God has indeed blessed us. And without in any way attempting to support this statement, I will just be content to just declare-

I believe that St. John's is a very vibrant, healthy congregation. It is my joy to have been called to devote the majority of my life in the priesthood to this congregation. I try to remind myself each day of what a truly unique congregation this is. And as I get around the diocese, and even outside of Central PA, and as I

encounter people in this region, I often hear people speak of this congregation with words of respect and admiration.

So, please do read my Rector's report and the other reports in the Annual Report booklet. Read them carefully. They speak of great love and devotion, of commitment and stewardship, of ministry and mission.

- IV. Having said all this, I want to devote this time, not to self-congratulations and pats on the back- but rather to where God might be calling us in the future.

As I began by quoting from Proverbs, "Without vision, the people perish". Even those most skilled in corporate management, be that in academics, or business, or among non-profits, all will say the same: it is imperative that an organization has a clear vision of itself and a corporate sense of where it wants to go.

At St. John's, we have had a string of corporate visions over the course of the past three decades. As I think about them, I am reminded that in each case, the process of developing these visions and plans was somewhat different. But none could succeed without gaining the wholehearted support of the congregation, and most importantly, without the gift of the Holy Spirit which enables us to do the work of God.

In each case, we developed a vision. Then we struggled and prayed. We gave time, personal energy, and funding. And sometimes what developed looked very much like what we envisioned and sometimes what developed was different. No matter. So long as we had a vision- the congregation would be oriented to mission. If we ever become a congregation concerned only about maintenance and not mission, we will die a slow death. If we ever forget who we are- a missionary people, planted in the heart of this community, bound together by circles of relationship, and gathered around the Lord's Table, then we will have lost our identity.

Our identity informs our mission. Our vision keeps us focused.

- V. 1. About 30 years ago, this congregation had a vision: we would expand within the limited footprint of our cherished and honored place on the Square. We would build a new Parish Hall.

Some were reluctant. It would cost too much. We shouldn't spend so much for a place to have fancy coffee hours. We would rob the community of precious green space on the Square.

Well, within three months of its completion, the Parish Hall was completed paid for. And look at it now: the weekly rehearsal hall for Cantate Carlisle, the overnight November shelter for CARES, a community center of activities- blood drives, precinct polling, Alcoholic Anonymous, Summer Program for Youth, to name but a few. Our vision might have been for a parish meeting place- but the Parish Hall is a meeting place for the entire community.

Ten years later we decided it was time to renovate the entire of this beloved building. It was a tough process of discernment and all were concerned that this historic church would somehow be diminished in the process.

To the contrary, over the years I have listened to scores of visitors who know something about Episcopal Churches tell me that this is the most handsome church they have ever worshipped in; that our acoustics are second to none; that this is a holy place.

2. A few years after the flurry of building and renovating our physical plant, many voices declared that we needed to be about more than "bricks and mortar". So in a process of congregational discernment, we became recognized by the national Episcopal Church as one of the first "Jubilee Ministry Centers"; and more importantly, we committed ourselves to joyful social ministry.

As that vision developed, morphed and bloomed anew, the initial work of Refugee Resettlement, after over 10 families, came to an end. But new work was begun and continues to be at the heart of our mission. Any vision for the future will surely affirm this.

3. Once we had a vibrant Outreach Ministry, many heard the call to grow. 15 years ago we had another vision- to plant a new congregation in nearby Dillsburg. So once again, we worked and planned and gave and prayed.

In the end, our vision didn't come to pass. But we didn't consume all our resources and in retrospect, we learned so much on the journey. The worship of the Dillsburg congregation became the foundation for our regular Saturday 5:00 Eucharist. The lessons in welcoming, engaging, and retaining membership was not lost on us, especially in the decade since with such a sharp cultural downtown in

church going and membership. And our effort inspired another diocesan church plant in southern York County- St. Benedict's Mission which is still developing.

4. And finally, about six years ago, we again went into a very aggressive and consuming process of discernment. The result was the five year Strategic Mission Plan.

-We dreamed of establishing a Preschool. And that vision bore fruit- starting with 3 children and now enrolling 37!

-We envisioned a model program of Youth Ministry, led by a paid Youth Minister. That model never became a reality. Yet, we continue to have a vibrant youth ministry and are blessed with great teens and committed leaders.

-We were determined to enhance our Outreach Social ministries with increased budgetary commitment. Then the recession hit us hard, individually and as a church. The vision of increased percentage of budget for Outreach didn't happen. But who can deny the good Social Ministry which continues to happen here, supported by multiple sources including our Outreach Endowment and individual giving.

-We anticipated that we would soon face a transition in our music leadership. But none of us could have dreamed that God would bless us as he has.

-We realized that we can't support our ministry with pledging and regular stewardship along. So we started a Legacy Society and anticipated that eventually, when many of us "matured", funding would come in. We were wrong. Many decided they didn't want to wait until they died to make a gift they would never see. The gifts started to flow in for new endowments and special needs.

-And we identified several projects which needed doing- the completion of the chancel renovation, the care of the pipe organ, the renovation of the kitchen, a special needs accessible door, the security of the churchyard enclosed in an attractive fence, the restoration of some of our stained glass windows. We thought it would require a Capital Drive. The recession postponed projects and undercut a Capital Drive. Yet..... Because there was a vision, donors gave generously and all of this has been accomplished without using precious, invested resources.

We have had many visions. And when you think about it all, the outcomes have not always matched the anticipated dream. But God has continued to bless us, provide for us, and nudge us. Because we had a vision.

5. So, we come to another season of visioning. The process is already underway. It began last year with Task Forces which listened to you and then reflected on the issues of Assisting Clergy and Stewardship. Tomorrow the Staff will be in retreat

to dream and vision. On Saturday, March 3, the Staff will be joined by the Vestry and the Parish Council, including the Commission chairs and co-chairs and we will work to develop the outline of a new Strategic Plan. Then, later in the spring, there will be opportunities to share with all of you our thoughts and to invite your visioning as well. Hopefully, by the end of June, the Vestry will be ready to approve a new blueprint for the next five years.

But you might be wondering: what kinds of dreams and visions do I have for St. John's? A couple of years ago, we came up with a vision statement- not long on details, but a narrative, concrete enough to both challenge us and pull at us.

*Arriving at St. John's on Sunday morning is like walking into a celebration of 12<sup>th</sup> Night. Persons of many cultures, ages and interests are united in the worship of the incarnated Christ. The church is packed with people gathered in fellowship, joined in prayer, singing with joy. The Lloyd Center overflows with children eagerly seeking knowledge of their Christian heritage. The undercroft bursts at its seams with young people planning their next mission project. The table is crowded yet everyone is welcome . . . and they made room for me.*

How will we make this happen?

It is an exciting time. Dreaming is always exciting. No doubt, we will be building on the past. We will be very aware of the present needs. And we will be confident as we embrace the future.

For this congregation of St. John's Church is now in our 260<sup>th</sup> year. This is a special anniversary year. Already in the plans is a parish celebration dinner on Heritage Sunday, the first Sunday of June this year. St. John's has been sustained over the years by the commitment of our people. Our doors are wide open. Our hearts of our compassion reach out to those in our community. Our voices sing the praise of God. Our theology proclaims the Christ in our midst.

So let us walk together. And as we walk, let us feel the Presence of the Holy One who walks besides us.