

There are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit . . . for the common good.

It's nice when the lectionary picks a perfect lesson for the annual meeting!

This short section of Paul's letter to the Corinthians is one of my favorites. It's a reminder to all of us that we need each other. No one person, no one family, no one parish has everything it needs on its own. And, even when working together, we can't accomplish our purpose for the common good without the Holy Spirit.

We need God. We need each other.

Redeemer has had an amazing year. We've had more baptisms than funerals – always a good sign! The choir's trip to Bristol provided an opportunity for the group to grow spiritually and musically. We have enjoyed the fruits of their labors. I'm working with some of the most faithful, fun, and creative people on the staff. The gifts we bring to our work complement each other. We are so blessed to be together.

Our youth program became more robust, thanks to the ministry of Sue Von and assistance from the diocese. I am, along with the Rev'ds Jeff MacKnight and Kurt Gerhard, interviewing a candidate to be our new youth minister in the next few weeks. I encourage all our young people and their parents to be a part of the Redeemer/St. Dunstan youth activities and the Potomac River Anglican Youth.

I cannot thank you all enough for your response to this year's Pledge Appeal. We received 95% of what we hoped for. I'm confident that we will make up the difference. I believe that one of the reasons for this response was the Narrative Budget put together by the staff and vestry. There is more transparency as to how your generosity is stewarded. The vestry has approved a deficit budget for 2019, but it is not insurmountable.

Last year, your generosity not only funded the operations of this parish, but also provided time and talent and treasure to the likes of Bethesda Cares, Samaritan Ministry, Street Church, Manna Food Center, and the Honduran reforestation project. You helped buy an ambulance and saved a hospital in Palestine.

But, enough about last year. Let's head into 2019

Senior Warden Susan Fitzgerald and I have given this year a theme: "Cleaning Closets". We're cleaning literally and figuratively. We need and want your assistance.

It's obvious that storage space is at a premium here. Susan and her helpers are going to begin going through absolutely everything. That which can be scanned and stored electronically will be so. "Stuff" that has accumulated and has no purpose will be disposed of. Hopefully, we'll discover where Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus went.

The other 'closets' that must be addressed are a bit more challenging. That's because Redeemer is in a transitional position. When I was called to be your rector, the parish saw around 140 – 150 people on average on a Sunday. Last year, our average Sunday attendance was 110. This number has been decreasing on an annual basis. This is not a Redeemer problem – it's a mainline church problem. The diocese and province are recording similar decreases.

We have been adding several families to our membership as well as lots of babies this year. Some people have moved away, temporarily or permanently. However, many are choosing not to attend on a weekly basis.

I get it. People are 'busy'. There are sports to attend. We want a day to sleep in. (Guess what, so do I.) I understand completely – I do. There are consequences to this choice, though.

The personal downside of not attending church regularly is that you miss an opportunity to be refreshed and renewed in your faith journey. You miss seeing all these wonderful faces. And, yes, I realize that I'm preaching to people who aren't here, but I will have this address available on line for all to see! Those of us at 10:30 am get to sing! Church is one of the very few places where people can sing in community these days. Music provides the means to worship God and gives healing to the soul.

If we want our children to continue going to church after they've left here, we need to be examples for them. Most specifically, children whose fathers attend church have a higher rate of continuing to practice their faith after they leave the nest.

The corporate downside is that empty churches don't grow. There is a distinct energy shift when this place is full compared to when it is half-full. People looking for a church want to feel that energy. It's attractive. When the energy is not there, visitors are often doted upon to the point they never return. (Yes, I've seen this happen here.) Bottom line: We need each other. Come to church.

Other closets need to be freshened. There are activities that have been the same for decades. All of the experts in church growth agree: what worked 40, or 30, or 20, or 10, or even 5 years ago doesn't work anymore.

The vestry and I have discussed and approved changes in the Strawberry Festival, namely moving the Silent Auction to a different event. We will need someone to take on this new event and make it a success.

Geoffrey has already made changes in how the Music Series operates. It has raised awareness of our ministry of music and its benefits to the wider community.

We should rethink how we do Sunday School, Adult Formation, and Spiritual Formation. The same attention needs to be made for other Redeemer traditions that are stuck in time. New leadership needs to step up to give our faithful veteran members a hand.

I'm thankful that two vestry members who are completing their terms of office have told me that they are willing to take on new tasks:

- Karen Stewart with ministry to our older population
- Shannon Hoogerheide with our younger families.

David Brown is taking on the task of looking at our bylaws. They are sorely lacking in gender inclusivity, among other things. He and his committee will bring them up to date, I'm sure.

There are other committees that need to be established, or reestablished:

Finance, Building & Grounds, Outreach, and Mutual Ministry Review. One new member has spoken to me about doing Parish Health ministry. Vibrant committees provide ways for newcomers to engage in the community.

Many ministries are currently being, or have been, tended to by one person only. This isn't a healthy practice. There is plenty of space for new faces in established ministries: Altar Guild, Flower Guild, Ushers, Sunday School Teachers. It would be a huge commitment toward the common good if leadership in every ministry would train their successor and feel free to step down after a 3-year commitment.

When I arrived, Redeemer had grown from a family-sized parish to one that was transitional between pastoral and program size. It was my understanding that the hope was to get to that program level. The reality is that, as systems do when in transition, we are retreating to the old ways of being. Friends, this trend must be reversed.

We may be able to maintain the status quo for 3 to 5 years, but it's not feasible to do so long-term. The trends can't be ignored. And, as I told the vestry on Wednesday night, you pay me to worry.

This year, let's concentrate on not only being healthy, but getting healthier. We have a committed and faithful staff. We have a talented vestry. We are stable financially. Now, we need to build on that. Ask someone who is not going to church to come and visit. Call someone you haven't seen here for a while and tell them they are missed. Commit to come to church more often. Pray that this community be open to change and growth.

Redeemer is a miracle! We should overflow like good wine into our neighborhood. God's gifts to us are gifts for the common good. Let's set the table and invite people to join us.

Amen.