

## **RECTOR'S REPORT**

### **The Rev. Phillip Parker**

To All Saints' Episcopal Church in common mission with Christ the King Lutheran Church,

Greetings to you and peace from God our Father and Christ our Lord. I pray you are doing well. I would like to continue to offer my thanks to you for your love and support. I also want to thank you for your ministry to both this church and to this wonderful community of Tupelo and the surrounding area. I know this has been another trying year where we have been called to live in a state of uncertainty because of the pandemic. In every situation where there is uncertainty, we are called to pause and rethink what we know and how we normally would act. I can say, this past year has been one where we had to do a lot of pausing and reconsidering. In many cases, we had to find new, creative ways to be the church, new ways to do church, and new ways to do God's work in this world.

Last year, we had to rethink how to hold our Annual Meeting. Instead of having a big in person celebration as we honor those who were willing to serve in leadership roles and elect new people to serve, we had to hold a virtual meeting using Zoom. This meant we had to learn a new way to do the business of the church. I am proud to say that with only a few technical difficulties we had a successful Annual Meeting. We passed a budget for the 2021 year and elected a new Senior Warden and new vestry members. As you read this report, you will notice that we are using a similar format for this year's Annual Meeting. As I write this report, I pray we will have another successful Annual Meeting.

First, I want to thank our Senior Warden, Dinetia Newman, and our Junior Warden, Fred Cannon, for your hard work and ministry. I know this has been another hard year where we had to find new ways to be the Church. I also want to thank our Vestry members for their work and ministry. I can say, this has been a good Vestry to do ministry with. Our Vestry members take nothing for granted. They ask questions, they debate, and they consider every aspect of a situation to see how it will benefit or hurt All Saints' and Christ the King. Thank you for your work. I also want to thank Bud Nelson for taking on the role of treasurer. I will be the first to tell you that I am not a numbers person. So, I am glad to have Bud here to help keep the numbers straight and to help us imagine all that this church can do in God's Kingdom.

Last February, one of the first questions that emerged, outside of COVID, was about our debt. With vision from our Vestry and much work from our Treasurer, we approached the holder of our mortgage to see what we could do to secure the balance of our debt. The bank worked with us on reducing our interest rate without us having to refinance. This minor act saved us over \$900 a month on our debt payments.

During a shortened Vestry retreat, we walked our church campus to help everyone on the Vestry and our Wardens to get a better sense of our space and the work that is done in this space. We opened every door and looked at every space. We discussed the different ministries that take place in our space and visualized how we could do better using our space to do God's work. In doing this, we also realized some changes that we could make to our space. This included the need to clean some spaces, and to reimagine how we use some of our space.

Over the course of the year, we have started much of this work. We reimagined our Children and Youth Formation. We moved all of our Youth Ministry to the EYC area. Also, by moving the Youth Sunday School program, this opened up a room that we could rent out to MUTEH to help them in their ministry to end homelessness in our community. We also made the painful decision to pause Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as our children's formation ministry and move to a more traditional children formation program. We made this decision because of the lack of volunteers we had to lead Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. We hope we will return to Catechesis of the Good Shepherd while also offering a more traditional Sunday School curriculum. This is something we will look at in the future. Children and youth formation is an important ministry in our church and one that we pray will continue to be strong and one that we hope will continue to grow. However, like many other Episcopal Churches across the nation, we know this pandemic has hurt children and youth formation ministries. We must be mindful of the impact that this pandemic has had on children and youth ministries, and on the volunteers who are the backbone of these ministries. This is something that we will continue to look at during this upcoming year.

Another space we noticed that needed some love and care was our kitchen. During the past two years, we did not use our kitchen space as much as in years past. As a result, some items were not used and were out of date. Also, because of Saints' Brew having to be reorganized into a "to go" ministry, our kitchen was being used completely differently. It came to our attention that our kitchen needed some cleaning and organizing. With the help of Mark Swanberg, Hannah Maharrey, and our Saints' Brew volunteers, we started cleaning and reorganizing the kitchen and pantry area. Mark has done a wonderful job cleaning out items that we no longer use and items that were outdated. He has also been gracious enough to reorganize the pantry. We see the need for a "deep clean" in the kitchen. We are planning for this in the upcoming months. Mark will continue to monitor the kitchen and coffee alley to make sure that they remain clean, organized, and usable. That is our goal here for our kitchen because we feed our community out of this kitchen. Thank you to Mark, Hannah, and all of our volunteers for helping to reimagine our kitchen so to create a space where we can feed our community. And, we are feeding our community with over 13,000 meals served in 2021.

Several other areas received some love and care this year as we reimagined how to use those spaces. One was the flower closet. Thank you to Deanna and all in the Flower Guild for your work that provides beauty for our worship. Another area that went through some cleaning and reorganization was the Christian Education closet. Thank you to Michelle Hester and Tommie Moore for caring for that space. The Christian Education closet is essential for our children and youth formation.

As I talk about caring for our church, I want to thank Chuck Redwood for coming on staff as our Sexton. Chuck is doing a fantastic job caring for our space. It has been a delight seeing Chuck care for our church by helping to provide a safe space for us to gather and worship.

Someone else I want to thank for being willing to join our staff is Emily Jackson. I do believe Emily has one of the toughest ministries that someone can have right now, that of Youth Director. I know from personal experience how hard it is to engage youth in ministry during normal times. It is especially challenging during a pandemic. Emily has been willing to jump in and reimagine what our

Youth Ministry looks like by seeing how we can balance formation with fun activities. She will continue to reimagine this ministry in the upcoming year. I can tell you that the only way to do youth ministry is to try something and see if it works or not. If it does not, you try something else. Trial and error are the foundations of youth ministry. Thank you, Emily, for your ministry.

As we worked this year to reimagine our ministries here at All Saints' and Christ the King, we remember that everything we do is grounded in our worship. Worship should always come first because worship feeds everything else that we do. This year has been another year where we had to reimagine how we worship. We started this past year with in person worship being suspended. For the first two months of 2021, our worship was online only. Our only in person worship for the first two months was a chilly outdoor Epiphany service with burning of the greens. Our next in person service was not until Lent.

When we returned to in person worship, we returned to a situation where we had to reimagine the liturgy and take precautions to, hopefully, provide safe but meaningful worship. If the Prayer Book allowed us to remove parts of the liturgy, we did. We encouraged social distancing and wearing masks during the service. We maintained these changes throughout Lent. However, during the Easter Season, we saw a drop in COVID cases which allowed us to bring back those elements of the liturgy that we took out. By Pentecost, we were back to our full liturgy except for drinking from the common cup. We started the practice of ministers intincting the host before offering communion to the people. This allowed us to take both elements safely.

Regarding the average Sunday attendance, we noticed that for the two services we were about half of our average Sunday attendance before the pandemic. During this time, I heard from many who said they were not ready to return to in person worship. I completely understood their reason for not being ready to return. In talking with several of my colleagues in various churches, we did well in returning to in person worship. I heard from several of my colleagues that they were having difficulties getting people to return to in person worship. While we all hoped that people would return to in person worship, we understood their concern for safety during this pandemic.

As we entered the Fall of 2021, we faced an additional difficulty. The Delta variant of COVID caused us to reimagine how we worshiped. With the support of our leadership, I made the tough decision to require masks during worship services and during formation activities. I believe this step helped us to maintain the ability to worship together in person. We also decided to limit singing during worship. I know everyone was not happy with these decisions. I hoped that these changes would only be temporary until we moved through the Delta variant. They were, and we did. We moved through Delta, dropped the mask requirement, and had a glorious celebration of the Nativity of our Lord with hymns and songs of praise.

What these new variants of COVID showed us was that we were going to have to continue to reimagine how we worship together and how we were going to be the church. I hope that we will learn important lessons on how we can reimagine what we do and how we do it. I am hoping we will learn these lessons, because I am sure we are seeing a change in the church that will require us to listen to God and follow where the Spirit is leading the church to do God's work in this world.

If there is a positive of this pandemic, I hope this is it. We can become more open to listening to God and discerning changes we will need to make to continue to do God's work in this world.

I believe we are, in fact, doing exactly this. Our Stewardship Committee this past year picked the theme for our pledge drive as "Growing in Grace." To grow, we have to not only think about the future, but be open to reimagine how God is calling us into the future. That grace is the willingness to be open and the willingness to discern and reimagine. "Growing in Grace" is not only the theme that we used for the pledge drive but also for this year. I want us to commit to this idea that we are being called to reimagine our lives together so that we may grow in grace as God's church in the world.

When Bishop Seage visited us on All Saints' Sunday for his annual visitation, he noted the courage it takes to have the vision to grow while we are still in a pandemic. Having the vision to grow while living during a pandemic requires faith. The faith to understand it is not us doing this work, but God doing God's work through us. It takes faith to believe God is leading us and guiding us. As we live into this faith, we reimagine what this growth looks like.

This past year, we were presented with the opportunity to reimagine what growing in grace looks like. In August 2021, we received an invitation from the Diocese of Mississippi to reimagine All Saints' and Christ the King with the possibility of having a curate on staff. During a year in which our church had to suspend in person worship, reimagine the liturgy, and reimagine children and youth formation; we now get to reimagine what it would look like to have another ordained clergy to lead us and help us discern God's call to us. To consider this is nothing but living in faith. During discerning this possibility, I continually heard from people here about how much better All Saints' is when there are two clergy members here. During this discernment time, All Saints' looked back in her history to reimagine what her future might look like. This discernment period brought some new life to the church during a time when we really needed it. And it showed. As we discussed this possibility and asked the church to respond, you did. We are hopeful of this possibility and we will know the fruits of our labor soon.

As we look towards the future, we will continue to be called to reimagine how we are the church. We will continue to face challenges. We will continue to have to ask hard questions. However, we do this knowing that God is guiding us. Let us continue to listen to God's call to us and reimagine how we can grow in grace.