

THE REV. PHILLIP PARKER
Rector

Grace to you and the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

All Saints', during 2022, was still dealing with how the COVID pandemic altered what we took as being normal. We spent a lot of the year asking questions and exploring how we could return to worship, formation, outreach, and fellowship that could feel normal to us, while also realizing our lives are not the same as they were before COVID. I am thankful for our Staff, our Wardens, our Vestry, our volunteers, and all others who re-envisioned what All Saints' can be and who helped us navigate a challenging year so All Saints' could do our part of God's work in the world. I am thankful for you. I am thankful for your service, your worship, your giving, and your spirit. I know All Saints' is doing amazing work in God's creation and that is because of you. I hope you feel God's love in your life. I hope you feel how God is moving through you to lift you up, giving you strength and courage to love and serve God with gladness and singleness of heart so you will always remember that you are a living member of the Body of Christ.

The most significant change that happened at All Saints' this past year was the calling of the Rev. Becca Walton as our curate. All Saints' stepped out in faith to make this call. Because of All Saints' stepping out in faith, we were able to add someone to our community who has brought many gifts and talents to our Parish. With Becca's help, we have been able to add more worship opportunities, increase our ability to offer pastoral care, and do God's work in the world. Part of Becca's own personal daily devotion is to say Morning Prayer and from the beginning of her ministry here, she asked if she could offer Morning Prayer during the week. While this is a small group that gathers at 8:30 Monday through Thursday, we can say that All Saints' has truly become a community that prays, almost every day, together. With Becca's ministry, we have also been able to expand our contemplative prayer offerings. We now offer Centering Prayer on Mondays and Lectio Divina on Thursdays, both at noon. What this means is that for five days out of the week, including Sundays, we are offering multiple opportunities to pray together as a community. This is astonishing for a church of our size. All Saints' is a church that prays together. Please join us.

Speaking of worshiping, our average Sunday attendance during 2022 returned to nearly what it was pre-pandemic. We were able to return to a Eucharist that felt almost normal as masks slowly faded away and congregational singing returned. We did take some time in developing a plan to offer the common chalice. I hope this showed that we were, and continue to be, thoughtful in our approach in how we respond to COVID and other illnesses.

Worship is the most important aspect of our church life. Worship is what grounds and centers everything else we do at All Saints'. Attending worship services regularly is, by far, the best way to be engaged at All Saints'. It is through the Morning Prayer services, the Healing Liturgy, and the Eucharist that we come together as a community to pray, to seek healing for ourselves and others, and to join in sharing God's feast. I was encouraged by the participation during last year's Holy Week. Every service was well attended and very meaningful, even when things did not go as planned. I would love to see the number of people who attend our services continue to increase during 2023. This would not only mean a lot to me but also to those who give of their time and talent so that we might have beautiful and meaningful liturgies. Thank you to the Choir, Altar Guild, Flower Guild, Vergers, Ushers, Servers, Eucharistic Ministers, and all others who help with this wonderful thing we call church.

For Lent last year, I offered a book study on Johnny White's book, *Hard Enough Already: Following Jesus in the 21st Century*. I offered this study on Sundays between our two services. After we completed the book study, we decided to continue meeting to explore how we see God at work in our lives. The Theology in the Library class was formed. This class has become another formation offering at All Saints'. In it, we often explore difficult topics to see where we might see God at work in the world today.

I want to thank Vicky Vance for her organization and leadership and care with the All Saints' Care Team. The mission and ministry of the Care Team is to do exactly what the name implies, to care for our All Saints' community. Vicky took the mission and ministry of the Care Team to heart and her leadership reflected her passion for All Saints'.

After Vicky expressed her need to step down as co-chair of the Care Team and as we decided on a new co-chair, we decided it was time to re-imagine some of what the Care Team could look like. Margaret Anne Robbins graciously took a co-chair role on the Care Team, helping Joellen Murphree, lead a great group of volunteers to care for our community. The Care Team continues to offer prayers, sending cards and flowers, and providing meals for those who might be sick or home bound.

In early 2022, we decided it was important to reach out to those whom we have not seen in church in a while. Pastoral Watch became a part of the Care Team. Through this ministry, members of the Care Team reached out to our members who we had not seen in a while, to let them know we love and miss them. The next change to the Care Team is the return of the Lay Eucharistic Visitors (LEV). Our plan is each week members of the Care Team will take communion to our sick and home bound. Our clergy will also continue taking communion to our members who are not able to come to church. By the time you read this, we will have the return of the LEV.

While we are talking about pastoral care, this past year was a difficult year for All Saints'. Everyone here at All Saints' is important and loved. However, I feel confident in saying that we lost some who were very loved by this community. This past year we lost Margaret Barshaw, Betty Lee Marshall, Joan Jones, Sam Alton Westmoreland, and Karen Asbury. All of these were hard losses for our parish. I will forever remember each of them and how they influenced my ministry. How could we ever forget Margaret's smile, Betty Lee and Karen's dedication and tell-it-like-it-is personalities, and Joan's kindness. I know that God's light perpetual shines upon them and that they are at rest with all the saints in the eternal habitations.

One of the hardest phone calls I have ever had to make was late one Wednesday morning this past October. Sam Alton had not returned to his dorm room that he shared with my son. Connor had received several text messages from people asking if he had seen Sam Alton, and so he decided to go out looking for Sam Alton. After speaking with Jay Perry, Associate A.D. at Mississippi State, I had to call Connor and break the news that Sam Alton had been found but, that he was no longer with us. The weeks that followed were some of the most challenging I have ever had to face in my ministry. I was hurting for the Westmorelands, for my church family, and for my son. It was hard not only because Sam Alton was a part of my church family, but also because he was so close to my personal family. I can't tell you how many times I would make that curve by my house as I was going home just to see Sam's truck parked in front of my house. Sam Alton was one of my son's best and closest friends. They had planned for almost a year to be roommates at Mississippi State University.

I was grieving, and as hard as I tried, there was no way I could completely hide what I was experiencing. I know you saw how tired and depressed I felt during that time. I want to thank you for being gracious and forgiving when I wasn't completely mentally or emotionally here. Thank you, my All Saints' family, for supporting and caring for me and my family. I love y'all so much.

Some good news is this past year we had six baptisms. We also had seven individuals who went through confirmation classes and six of those were confirmed during Bishop Seage's visit. Already in 2023, we have had one baptism. We had many to transfer to All Saints' from other Episcopal Churches. These are positive signs in the life of our parish. Let's continue this trend by opening our doors and inviting those searching for a church home into ours.

In an effort to take All Saints' out into the community, All Saints' began to explore the possibility of the Parish participating in community events. To test this idea we picked an event where All Saints' could set up a booth to provide information about the Parish and invite people to worship. In our inclusive and welcoming nature, clergy and several members of the Parish set up a booth at the 2022 Tupelo Pride event. I am willing to say our participation in this community event was a success. We had numerous people come to our booth and thank us for being there and for supporting the LGBTQ community. I remember one young woman who told me she drove over an hour to attend Tupelo Pride. She was in tears talking to me, thanking me for being there. She said she had never experienced a church being this welcoming. I know some of those who were there have attended some of our events.

This needs to be the first of many community events where All Saints' goes out into the world to love, serve, and invite. This is something we can do that takes a little time and planning and is something we all can participate in and have fun with. I would like All Saints' to become a part of many community events. This next thing that I want to suggest is something that could really be fun. I would like All Saints' to have a float in the 2023 Tupelo Christmas parade. This will take some planning and work, but I think it would really be fun and a great way to spread some All Saints' love. We need ideas for a float. Let's start thinking of some. But don't worry, we will also continue to offer free hot chocolate to parade goers.

To invite the community to All Saints', this past summer we started asking local community agencies to come to our Wednesday potlucks and talk about their work in and around Tupelo. What started with being a way to provide some form of programming during summer potlucks, turned into something enlightening and educational that lasted into the fall. We had seven or eight local community agencies visit us and tell us about all the great work that is being done in and around Tupelo.

While we are talking about agencies in our community who are doing great work, our Servant Ministry has been faithful in supporting many agencies in our community. Our Servant Ministry is our financial arm of our outreach ministries. All Saints' Vestry made a commitment several years ago to set aside \$15,000.00 every year that goes to supporting social service agencies both locally, in our State, and nationally. Those on the Servant Ministry committee decide where that funding is allocated.

For several years, Dawn Bean has chaired Servant Ministry. Dawn's time as Chair of Servant Ministry came to an end in 2022. Thank you, Dawn, for your ministry and for helping others do good work across our community and Diocese.

We asked Susan Hyatt if she would be interested in serving as Chair for Servant Ministry and she graciously accepted. However, in the face of the current financial situation at All Saints', we are going to pause the work of Servant Ministry and spend this year refocusing that ministry. This may mean narrowing the focus of Servant Ministry to align closer to the core values, mission, and ministry of All Saints' as a whole. This will be important and rewarding work and I am thankful for Susan's commitment and to all of those who volunteer in Servant Ministry. We have some work ahead of us.

I want to thank Mark Swanberg for his ministry as the chair of Hospitality. Mark, Manuela Hayden, and Alex Watson spent countless hours throughout the year planning and preparing hospitality receptions for All Saints'. Mark has been faithful as the chair of Hospitality. However, there are times when each of us may feel that we need a change. This past fall, Mark felt it was time for a change, so he decided to step down as the chair of Hospitality. He still wants to be part of Hospitality and to help. He's just going to let someone else do the organizing and planning.

Like the Care Team and Servant Ministry, this is a good time to look at the mission and ministry of Hospitality. We are going to spend a little time reflecting on the mission and ministry of Hospitality and on how our needs may have changed throughout the pandemic. We also want to see how other ministries, such as Coffee Alley, overlap with the ministry of Hospitality. One of the first decisions we will need to make is that of a new chairperson. I am hopeful that Mark, Manuela, and Alex will stay involved with this important ministry. I am looking for to more King cakes and banana pudding.

One ministry where we may want to explore the overlap with Hospitality is with Neighborhood Life. While Hospitality focuses inwards to the Parish, Neighborhood Life reaches out to our neighbor around All Saints'. They do this with events such as providing hot chocolate during the Tupelo Christmas parade and hosting the St. Brew Christmas dinner. Neighborhood Life is our ministry focused on showing love to our downtown neighbors.

I want to thank Cindy Smith for her work over the past several years as chair of Neighborhood Life and for being willing to organize and plan how this great group of volunteers showed love to our neighbors. Cindy decided it was time to step down from her position of chair. And now, I would like to thank Allison Bedillion for taking the chair position of Neighborhood Life and leading All Saints' effort to love our neighbors. I also thank those involved in Neighborhood Life for your ministry.

I do believe that loving and serving God and our neighbors is our core value at All Saints'. We show this every weekday with Saints' Brew. For the past several years, Hannah Maharrey served as the Director of Saints' Brew. This past August, Hannah stepped down from that role. After reviewing several resumes from highly qualified candidates who were interested in the position, All Saints' called Deepika Dey to fill the vacancy of Saints' Brew Director. Deepika brings a wealth of knowledge concerning nutrition and diet. She is also one of the most organized persons I have ever met. Thank you, Deepika, for taking on this ministry and leading Saints' Brew into what we feel God is leading it to be.

While 2022 has been a good year for All Saints', there are items that we need to work on and improve during this upcoming year of 2023. An important part of our ministry together was overlooked during the pandemic, a Mutual Ministry Review (MMR). This is a process where the Rector, Wardens, and Vestry set expectations for the Rector and Vestry. After a determined period, a review of these expectations is completed.

The Mutual Ministry Review is not a job performance evaluation, but a time for a review of the ministry of the parish and the rector, and a mutual review of those expectations. With the help of the Diocese, the Wardens, Vestry, and I engaged in some of the work of a ministry review. However, we soon realized the importance of first stating our expectations for our ministry, something that was overlooked during the pandemic. Even having not set expectations, the work that we did engage in provided a good overview of the ministry of All Saints' and myself. This work looked at many aspects of the ministry of All Saints' and the Rector, and we got feedback concerning everything from core values, outreach, pastoral care, worship, and even sermons. This work highlighted both what we saw as the strengths and weaknesses of All Saints' and the Rector. At this year's Vestry retreat, we will take the work that we have done with the MMR and set expectations for 2023 for both the Vestry and Rector. This will be beneficial in shaping our mutual ministry over the upcoming year and providing focus for the ministry and mission of All Saints'. We will also establish a time for our next MMR to review these expectations.

A challenge that we are currently facing and one which will continue as we move forward through this year is that of our finances. While we had a great stewardship drive last fall, we did fall short of what we think we will need to have a balanced budget. I know this past year has been hard on all our finances. We watched as prices for just about everything increased. The same is true for All Saints' as the cost of doing ministry has increased. The budget for 2023 does reflect the challenges we are facing. Now, at this time, we will be okay because we do have some funds saved for situations like this. However, this year, many of our ministries will have to rely on funding they have in reserve. That is why those reserves are there. It is important for us to know that we are now at a point where we are no longer able to cut expenses to make up a difference in the budget. What that means is, unfortunately, the next step would be looking at staff expenses including salaries and, maybe, positions. That will not happen this year and we do not want that to ever happen.

So, what can we do. We can invite. We can invite people to come to church. We invite people to experience what God has to offer them through this wonderful parish of All Saints'. We can open our doors and share God's love with this town. This year, instead of focusing on what All Saints' is lacking or how we are hurting, we must focus on the gifts that God has given All Saints' and how we can share those gifts with those around us. Our strength is us. We call ourselves a welcoming and inclusive parish. We need to live into that frame of mind.

In my Christmas Eve sermon, I borrowed the theological idea from the Rev. Sam Wells that God did not come just "for" us but to be "with" us. It is that simple shift in thought from "for" to "with" that I feel will help us to share God's love with those who need it. We need to stop asking the questions, "what is God doing for me?" and "what is All Saint's doing for me?" This year, we need to focus on how God is with us. We need to see how All Saints' is with us. We need to focus on how we are with those we love and how we can be with those who need love, support, and healing. That means, we need to be here for each other, our friends, our family, and our neighbors. Let's make being here, with each other, a priority. Let's find a way to let those who do not attend church, at All Saints', know we are here for them and willing to be with them. If anyone is interested in helping me figure out what this looks like, let me know.

The last item I want to share with you breaks my heart. This past fall, our brothers and sisters of Christ the King Lutheran Church shared with the leadership of All Saints' that it is time for the closure of Christ the King Lutheran Church.

Christ the King is currently working with the ELCA on the steps to close Christ the King Lutheran Church in Tupelo, Mississippi. It is sad to say that the last Lutheran service of Holy Communion took place last December. I want to thank Christ the King for giving me the opportunity to learn about the ELCA and the Lutheran branch of Christ's church. It has been an honor to worship with you and to serve you. I am thankful that Emily Jackson will continue her ministry as our Youth Director and that Michelle Hester will continue her ministry working with our Children Formation. I know you are grieving. Please know that we are here for you and for all the members of Christ the King. I ask everyone in All Saints' to support the members of Christ the King as they move through this closure. Now is the time to put aside names and traditions and love each other as children of God. To everyone who was a member of Christ the King Lutheran Church, you will always be a part of this community at All Saints' and know you are always welcome to worship with us.

Even with that sad news, I am excited about the ministry that is taking place at All Saints'. Thank you to everyone who, over this past year, gave your time, talents, and funding to help All Saints' live into the ministry God has given us to do. I am excited about the direction All Saints' is heading because of the leadership that we have here at All Saints'. Over the past two years, Dinetia Newman has served as your Senior Warden. It has been an honor to be in ministry with her. Dinetia brought so many gifts and talents to the ministry of Senior Warden that I cannot name all of them. Dinetia, I know it has been a challenge to help lead All Saints' out of a pandemic and I thank you for your work and support.

We also could not have done everything that we have been able to do without the support and leadership of our Vestry. Thank you to everyone who served on our Vestry this past year. It was an honor to serve with you. A big thank you to Anna Fleming, Mickey Gray, Mark Maharrey, and Kamme Riddle for your ministry on the Vestry. It was an honor to serve with you. Always know, you served All Saints' during one of the most challenging times in recent history.

I am excited for all we will be able to do over the next year. We have a lot to look forward too, but we also have a lot to do. With your help, we will continue to carry on doing God's work. However, the only way we can do it is if we do it with each other. I encourage you to regularly come to worship services, attend our formation offerings, and volunteer for one of the many ministries we have at All Saints'. Most importantly, I encourage you to share your love of God and All Saints' with everyone.

May God continue to bless this parish. May we continue to hear God's call to us. And may God always be with us.