

## **The Rector's Annual Report**

*Sermon preached at St. Paul's, Wallingford CT, on 1/22/17 (Epiphany 3A) by the Rev. Dee Anne Dodd.*

Here we are into our 276<sup>th</sup> year and looking pretty darn good. After all, we've had (as the folks in Hollywood might say) "a little work done."

About this time last year we were surrounded by scaffolding and caution tape for the painting of the sanctuary.

Our beautiful rose window was repaired as part of this project.

But that was just by the professionals.

Volunteers painted restrooms upstairs and down, and freshened up Wilkinson Hall.

And how about the Common Room?

Rumor has it that there are still a few finishing touches yet to be done, but what a glorious makeover!

The energy for painting extended across the parking lot to the Thrift Shop, celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> year with a top to bottom renovation.

But looking good isn't everything. We threw a few parties too!

At the anniversary Dinner-Dance at Wallingford Country Club, a good time was definitely had by all.

The Community Celebration Concert we hosted for a packed house will likely go down as one of my favorite events EVER.

I loved hearing the readers share milestones of our history punctuated by music from our Choir and Choristers, members of the Wallingford Symphony and the Mariachi Academy.

A highlight was certainly an anthem composed for the occasion by our own Music Director.

Of course the centerpiece of our anniversary was worship.

Those of us here on Sunday, May 1<sup>st</sup> recall that Bishop Laura Ahrens officiated at a spirited service, with eight of our young people making a mature profession of faith in Confirmation and

Church School students having fun trying on the bishop's mitre.  
Although her hat might've been fancy,  
Bishop Ahrens wore her L.L.Bean "water shoes" –  
ready to process outside on that rainy day to help us offer water bottles  
to the folks coming down Main Street for the Autism Awareness Walk.  
Then, only a bit water-logged and none the worse for the wear,  
we went downstairs to a delicious lunch – catered, no less.

That day struck me as a powerful microcosm of what this parish is to be  
about -- service *beyond* these walls to the larger community  
while building community *within* the parish,  
rooted in lively and life-giving worship of the God of all.  
Bishop Ahrens commended us for choosing  
to celebrate our anniversary in this manner,  
and her office made a video of that day which was distributed  
throughout the Episcopal Church in CT.

Now even while we were enjoying these and other celebrations,  
we managed to pursue ongoing ministries.  
A third mission trip to Nicaragua.  
Our Girl's Friendly Society one of the most active in the state.  
Both the Holiday Fair and the Tea changed leadership.  
We served at the Wallingford Emergency Shelter, involving new people  
in this ministry.

During Lent we explored the Gospel with our five senses. And we  
began that season by offering "Ashes to Go" in front of church for the  
first time, even while having three traditional services.

We made casseroles for one another in times of need,  
visited with communion and flowers, and most of all prayed.

We kept the church open for prayer and reflection on Wednesdays,  
Election Day and for the Holiday Stroll.

Our Healing Prayer Group, begun just over a year ago, has met faithfully  
to study and deepen our own prayer lives,  
and will soon be sharing this with the whole congregation.

We significantly *exceeded* our expected pledge income.

Last fall, about twenty of us took a field trip  
to worship at the Civic Center with Episcopalians from across CT,

and were inspired by our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's invitation to be "the Jesus movement".

And one warm night last July, our Vestry took "a walk in the neighborhood" just to see what God was up to.

Most of this is done by faithful volunteers as a labor of love. We look forward to thanking many of you by name at the meeting. We're also well-served by a dedicated staff. Most everything that happens here seems to land on the busy desk of Parish Secretary Debi Page, who's dearly devoted to this parish.

Music Director Jay Lindsay has had a banner year with his commissioned anthem, first-ever Evensong, gorgeous Choral Prelude on Christmas Eve and, well, just listen to the Choir, Choral Scholars and Choristers.

We've also had staff changes this year.

As good news, we welcomed Bobby Gervais as our Sexton.

As sad news, we said goodbye to Becky Scalesse as our Director of Christian Education. Fortunately, Becky and her family remain with us as parishioners. Our Search Advisory Committee is charged with the big job of finding her successor.

We're also looking for a new nursery care provider as Alyson Zuniga, who joined us last fall, has taken a full-time job.

Later this morning at the brunch, we'll be filling a Time Capsule with artifacts of the current day.

That will be fun, but also *serious business*.

For by planting a time capsule for future generations, we're assuming that there will be people here to find it.

We're committing ourselves to doing everything in our power on our watch to insure that there will be a healthy Christian community here for them.

In previous Annual Reports, this is where I might have launched into a mini-history lesson of how folks who came before did this for us.

How they survived everything from being on the "wrong side" of the American Revolution

to the burning down of the first building on this site  
to create an enduring Episcopal presence in this town.

I could certainly turn to today's lections, drawing inspiration  
from the prophet Isaiah's saga of God leading the people from  
exile to return.

Or how Paul challenged the Christians in Corinth to overcome  
conflict and uncertainty to build the early church.

Or how Jesus called the first disciples to follow him, and equipped them  
to "fish for people" – and that he's doing the same for us today.

All very true. But I would do us no favor if

I did not include a heightened sense of urgency.

The reality is, we can't just keep doing what we've always done and  
expect to be here for those who come next.

As vital as things may seem for us today (and they are),

long-term demographics do not bode well for mainline churches.

This is especially true in New England.

At the beginning of this report I joked about the Hollywood expression  
"having work done".

And indeed we have done a lot of work this year  
which adds up to far more than a "facelift".

But we know that we live in wildly changing times and, if anything,  
the pace of change may only accelerate in the year ahead.

*How do we stand a fighting chance of having the good work  
done this year endure for the long haul?*

I suspect many of us are still contemplating

what the changes now unfolding will mean for the future,  
but at the moment I tend toward the counterintuitive.

In this loud and busy world moving at warp speed,  
how about trying a truly radical response: *Stillness*.

Try doing fewer things with greater intentionality, greater intensity.

Figure out what in God's name really matters and give it all you got.

Prompted in part by my continuing education on “Discipleship Matters” of last fall, I’d like to propose that we take some of the energy lavished upon the anniversary festivities and invest it this year in growing as disciples of Jesus Christ. I’m looking to work together to seek creative and challenging approaches to spiritual formation and renewal. Finding ways as a parish to immerse ourselves in scripture from worship on out to church school, youth, adult forum and then some – so that we all know the stories of God’s presence and power in history to our own day.

**“Cherishing the Past, Celebrating the Future.”**

That was the slogan, offered by Donna Regan, selected in the contest that kicked off our 275<sup>th</sup> anniversary all those months ago.

Now it’s time to start anew – celebrating, yes, but by God’s grace living faithfully into the future.

So that one day when we’re long gone into the nearer presence of our Lord, others will be here to celebrate a past worth cherishing.