

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

Let me repeat that question, why are you here? I'm sure your immediate answer would be to hear the Word of the Lord, to listen to the sermon being preached, and certainly to partake of the Sacrament offered here at the altar. But you could do those same things in another church. What was it that made you get out of bed this morning and come to this church, this place?

Before going any further, let me introduce myself. My name is Lois Olesen, I've been a member of St. Paul's since Sept. 3, 2001, and I attend the 9:30 service. I am not a morning person. @ Actually I think 8 or 8:30 in the morning is the crack of dawn. My husband, Bob, was a morning person, @ and I could always count on him to wake me up in time for church. Bob died about two and a half years ago, so now I really depend on my alarm clock!

Why am I here? What brought my husband, Bob, and I to this place of worship? Well, that's a rather strange story and I'd like to share some of it with you this morning.

In early February of 2001 Bob and I found ourselves in need of finding a new church home. I'd always said that if we were ever looking for a new church I wanted to check out St. Paul's Episcopal Church. We didn't know anybody who attended here, but whenever there was any kind of a social ministry happening here, or in town, Brendan McCormick was always a major part of it and standing 6' 5" tall, you couldn't miss him! We often attended the Martin Luther King Jr.'s memorial service held regularly here, as well as the concert performed by the New Haven Gay Men's Chorus. When we went to see the portion of the Aids Quilt that was displayed in Wallingford, Brendan was there, too.

The first regular church service we attended was the Ash Wednesday service in Feb, 2001. We parked behind the church and entered through the glass door at the rear of the church. The first thing we noticed was the statement etched into the glass of that door, "In this Church There Will Be No Outcasts." Wow! That was impressive! My first thought was "Oh my goodness, they not only preach the

Gospel here, they ADVERTISE it.”

As impressive as that was, though, I had been born and raised in the Lutheran Church and being a “Lutheran” was just engraved on my heart. We live close to an entrance to I-91 so it was quite easy to drive into New Haven to check out several other Lutheran churches. We really had some funny experiences but we finally settled on Bethesda Lutheran Church on Whitney Ave. as being our favorite one. And so we started a pattern of worshipping one Sunday at Bethesda and the following Sunday at St. Paul’s.

We attended Bethesda’s Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday and it was absolutely spectacular! Bethesda has an unusual combined church and educational facility that allowed us to move from one area to another for different parts of the service, ending with the Easter celebration in the sanctuary. Then we came to St. Paul’s for the Easter Sunday service and (hold on a second here while I dig this out), along with the bulletin, the ushers gave us a little stone like this one - just a little stone that you might find at the bottom of a flower pot. In part of his sermon, Brendan talked about how the women going to the grave that first Easter morning worried about who would move that large stone away so they could get close to Jesus’ body to anoint it. Then Brendan asked us to hold in our hand the stone that the ushers had given us and asked, “What stone in your hearts keeps you from getting “close” to Jesus?”

More than sixteen years later this little stone sits on the shelf above my computer and daily reminds me not to allow any kind of a problem, a concern, or any kind of a “stone” to keep me from being close to Jesus. After Bob died and I started cleaning out his office, I found the little stone that he had been given sitting next to his computer monitor, placed there for the same reason. Obviously that Easter Sunday sermon was every bit as spectacular as the Easter Vigil the night before at Bethesda!

After many weeks spent alternating between the two churches we made an appointment with Brendan to learn more about the Episcopal Church. We explained what we were doing and that we liked and felt very comfortable in both churches but we couldn’t seem to make a decision about which church we wanted to make our

permanent home. Brendan casually suggested that maybe we should just continue worshipping in both churches - and I promptly burst into tears!

Between wiping my eyes and blowing my nose I explained to Brendan that I needed a church home! I was born and raised in Wisconsin where I have tons of relatives. Bob's parents were immigrants from Denmark making him a first generation American with no nearby relatives. For me a church home was not just a place to worship on Sunday mornings, it was also a place where we could find friends – friends whom we could love and who would love us in return despite all of our faults. You know, you can pick your friends but you can't pick your relatives. Well, in our case, we were picking our relatives, or people who might fill those empty spots in our hearts as parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, nieces and nephews.

When we started out on this search for a new church home we never imagined that it would take almost seven months to reach a decision. I realized that something else was happening to us during that period as well. Bob and I were regularly talking about our individual faith, our relationship with God, what we were feeling during the course of a service, and even how we felt about the experience several hours later. We genuinely liked both faith communities. We felt spiritually nourished and uplifted in both places. The people around us seemed to be very sincere in expressing their reverence for God. They were friendly, came up to talk to us after the service, and warmly greeted us when we returned. So which one should we choose?

Finally in about mid-August Bob suggested that maybe we were looking at our whole dilemma in the wrong way. We'd been talking about what WE felt we were getting from each Sunday service – what WE felt each church might give us to meet our particular needs. He suggested that perhaps we should turn the question around and ask ourselves what we had to OFFER to each congregation. With whatever talents God had given us, what could we GIVE BACK?

That was the turning point and made us think in a totally different way. What talents did we have that could best be used in which congregation? Bethesda had a larger choir than St. Paul's so maybe we could join the choir here. Bethesda appeared to be a more affluent church than St. Paul's, so perhaps our monetary

offerings might be more needed at St. Paul's. Bethesda already had a church web site up and running, St. Paul's did not and I think that was the final kicker for my computer-geek husband. (Little did I know at the time that St. Paul's had so many walls and red doors that needed to be painted.)

Next Sunday is the Stewardship Brunch and you'll be asked to turn in a completed Pledge Form and yes, the church certainly does need money. I was really impressed with Dee Anne's sermon last Sunday. She told us about a time in her life when she was working part time, was pregnant with their second child, and her husband, Brad, lost his job. I can't imagine a financially scarier position to be in. And yet, this was when they really got serious about giving ten percent of their income to their church (and other charities) because it reminded them how much they still had. By giving more than they thought they could afford, they felt better, more financially secure.

This past week you should have received a letter from the Stewardship Committee that included a Pledge Form, rather than a pledge card as in the past. If you haven't done so already, take a few minutes and read what the committee wrote on the back side of that Pledge Form. It's inspiring to think about the whole concept of putting our "giving back to God" at the top of our list, rather than the leftovers at the end of the week, or the end of the month.

Remember, too, our time and talent are equally as important as our treasure. We all live very busy lives and I'm always amazed at the number of people in this congregation who so willingly give of their time to make this church flourish. And they may not have a particular talent, but they'll willingly agree to do a particular job and in the process develop a new talent.

For example; I'm always amazed at the number of people who show up to peel apples for the pies that are sold at the church fair. Some of them probably don't peel an apple for the rest of the year, but they readily pitch in for this major event at our church. Little kids, elderly people, and every age in between turn up to spend a few hours peeling apples. Some come every day during that week, others maybe can only spend an afternoon or a single evening to help out. I remember several years ago a teenage girl rode her bike quite a distance from her home to spend a few hours

peeling apples after school. Giving of your time and talent can be a lot of fun!

Perhaps the most important thing you can offer this congregation is your presence here on Sunday morning. What do I mean by that? Stop and think – what is the very first thing you do when you enter this building? You look around to see who's here!! You smile and say hello to everybody who's nearby, or you might give a nod, or a slight wave to somebody sitting several pews away in the sanctuary. You're actually looking around to see if your church "family" is all here.

So again, why are you here? That's a question that each individual may answer in a different way but I, for one, am very grateful to be a part of this Episcopalian faith community – part of THIS family.

Thank you