

Proper 8b: 6/27/21
St. Paul's Church, Wallingford CT

The Rector's Annual Report/Homily *Submitted by The Reverend Dee Anne Dodd*

"A year like no other." That phrase appears in several of the parish reports for 2020. And of course it's true: 2020 *was* a year like no other. The irony, for me, is that I was expecting it to be an unusual year – just not in the way it turned out.

You may recall that I'd planned a sabbatical for April through July of last year. By early March 2020, both my overseas study and coverage to keep things humming here were planned to the nth degree. I couldn't believe how organized I was -- until I wasn't. Suddenly life became a scramble of cancellations and hasty attempts to adapt. Things were changing so quickly that we joked about going from Plan B to Plan C to . . . oops, we're running out of letters!

I'm blessed to serve with an incredible team of staff and volunteers who joke and exude goodwill even while working through intractable issues. I hope you realize that our staff went way beyond the call of duty (not to mention their job descriptions). They did whatever needed to be done as a labor of love – for God, God's people, and you this parish community.

Jay Lindsay went from directing the choir on a Thursday evening to figuring out on Friday morning how to livestream. Frances Chamberlain abandoned weeks of planning for Church School to prepare a sermon with a day's notice. She went from behind-the-scenes coordinator to worship leader overnight. Jennifer Parsons went seamlessly from holding down the fort in the office to doing so from her home. Bobby Gervais, usually cleaning up from a flurry of activities here, found his place helping with the logistics of our new schedule.

The church may not have been "open" in the familiar way, but it sure *wasn't closed*. Just a glance at Jay and Frances' annual reports should convince you that many people never worked harder in their lives. Harder, in part, because we were called to quickly figure out how to do things we'd never done before. But we as a community did it.

Please treat yourself to every report to get a sense of the creativity and caring that's been unleashed. If anything, many of the reports are too modest. Karen Rowe's GFS report doesn't mention how they were the first to drop off goody bags – a practice Frances expanded to all of our Church School families. Nor does the Altar Guild report tell how seasonal gifts and devotionals were dropped off to shut-ins and others. Amy Foster's Adult Forum report humbly says they were on hiatus until fall, when as early as last May we'd begun meeting online as the Good Book Club reading Matthew's Gospel. The website team of Andrew Speyer and Harriet Sholtes didn't submit a report – even though Harriet has faithfully posted my email blasts every week. Nor is there a report on Lenten Morning Prayer led by Helen Stowe, which grew this year as people joined on Zoom to pray from their homes beyond Lent until Pentecost. All these things and others may seem modest to those doing them in the midst of a global pandemic. But I think they're well worth celebrating. It was hard to keep track of time last year, much less all the new things we were trying. That's why this year's Annual Report is so significant.

Since walking out of church on Sunday, March 8, 2020, until today, we've missed one scheduled Sunday of worship, and that was due to a worldwide technological glitch. Christian formation has been offered for children, youth and adults. Staff, Vestry, Regathering, various committees, and Healing Prayer have met regularly in new ways. We've reached out to the community through Master's Manna, Columbus House, the diaper ministry, and a protest for racial justice. Animals were blessed, the school year was blessed, an Election Day Prayer Vigil held, Advent wreathes made, a labyrinth walked, ashes administered, palms distributed, music created and enjoyed, and so much more. Christmas and Easter were faithfully celebrated – online and in-person, recorded and live, inside and out. Most things were done on multiple levels for specific audiences. If you haven't already done so I suggest watching, even now, the Christmas and Easter Celebrations on our YouTube Channel. Recorded by our own Luke Adams, they're pretty snazzy by any standard.

During the meeting we'll take a moment to offer some thank yous, but for now let me recognize: our Senior Warden Chuck Maynard, who extended his term an extra year and a half due to my planned sabbatical and then the pandemic; Junior Warden Gene Gervais for the same, adding staff and ECCT meetings to his schedule; Ted Hartsoe, our Treasurer, who not only did his regular work with precision but added the arduous task of securing a PPP loan and then making sure it was forgiven; all members of the Vestry whose work ended up being different than what they'd signed up for; Donna Regan, the Joining Jesus Committee and all donors who raised more than \$355,000 during an economic downturn; my patient friends on the Regathering Task Force who some weeks spent more time together on Zoom than we did with our families; Tammy Napoli and the ace team of Regathering ushers to keep everyone safe; Sharon Rogalski, Mary Ellen Connell, and Pat and Art Sousa who spent hours standing in the parking lot in all types of weather for the Community Drive-Thrus, as well as every person who drove-thru; the St. Paul's Nursery School, led by new Director Michelle Michael, who worked hard keeping the children safe while learning; the intrepid Tech Team who kept telling me it couldn't be done – and then did it anyway; each of you who kept giving faithfully, and praying faithfully; and everyone who was patient, kind and forgiving as we struggled to make it up as we went along. Thank you. Thanks be to God for you.

Just as important as what we've done, is what we've *learned*. As much as we've missed this beautiful place which holds so many memories and prayers for each of us, as glorious as it is to be here together today, as much as it's easier to do liturgy in a place designed for it, as much as all that is surely true, so too is this: *This place isn't the church.*

It's beautiful. It's holy. It's a blessing. It's entrusted to our care. But the same can be said about *each of us*. The difference is that this building, however magnificent, is made with human hands. We're made in the image of God.

This date to regather here today was chosen months ago in the hope that it would be safe and feasible by now. One thing we didn't realize is that the appointed Collect (Proper 8, Prayer Book, p.230) perfectly captures what we're learning about being church. You heard it at the beginning of the service. After acclaiming Jesus Christ as our cornerstone, it asks that we be "joined together in unity of spirit" as "a holy temple acceptable" to God.

We're the "holy temple", the church, wherever we are. Sitting in the pews? Of course. Out on the lawn? That too. Standing in the parking lot? Absolutely. Blue Hills Orchard on Easter morning? Alleluia! Curled

up on a couch watching the livestream from another state or across town? Sure. Or how about the beach, as we've heard recently, taking church on vacation?

Now that we've been forced, sometimes kicking and screaming, to find church beyond these walls, just think what we might accomplish now that we have access to this beautiful space again. To inspire us to build up one another as "living stones of a holy temple". To recognize ourselves as "living stones of a holy temple". ("Dedication of a Church" Preface, Prayer Book p. 348)

In some ways, it's easier to think of church as a building, isn't it? As a place we go occasionally, instead of who we are every day. But God in Christ Jesus, our cornerstone, has called us to be *living stones* in this world so loved. This was as true before the pandemic as it is today. For many of us this era has forced us to struggle anew with what that means. Many of us had to develop new skills and ways of doing things. Many of us were plunged into a season of soul-searching, and may or may not have liked what we found. For all of us, this era has created a break between what came before and what comes next.

Some of you have commented on a vocabulary word learned from me this year. The word? *Liminal* – meaning, betwixt and between, a threshold from one way of being to another. Turning, to use a Way of Love word. A process of transformation, healing. We're in a *liminal* space as we emerge from this pandemic era.

Of all the tragedies of this tragic year, one of the saddest would be for those of us who've made it through not to have learned something from it. How heart-breaking for all this time to have been for naught. We as Christians know that God did not wreck this pandemic upon us, but God can work with and through anything. God can bring us through this liminal space to where God needs us to be, now.

A group of Vestry, the Regathering Task Force and Joining Jesus campaign, will meet in July to address some big questions, which I urge you to consider as well: **What were some of our pre-pandemic ministries and what did they look like during the pandemic? Which ones are still essential (or not)? What new ministries that emerged should we retain in some form? What lessons will we take from this time and how will we incorporate them moving forward?** (Adapted from "Hybrid Church: A Way Forward for Church Leaders" by the Rev. Tim Schenck)

I share these questions now in this report for 2020 because they're part of the legacy of the year -- both for us as a parish, and as individual Christians. This "year like no other" will impact us for years to come. Pray that we learn the right lessons from it. Pray that we bind up the wounds left in its wake. Pray God that we meet this moment faithfully, with grace and perseverance and most of all love.

#