

ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH-CAPITOL HILL 2009-2010 STRATEGY

ST. MARK'S PARISH began in 1867-69 as a mission to Federal workers on Capitol Hill. The glorious late-Victorian, neo-Gothic edifice we call home was completed in 1894 with the parish hall added in 1926 and the undercroft expanded in 1991.

The Rev. Paul Abernathy, our eleventh rector, began his tenure in 1998, succeeding Jim Adams (1966-1996), Bill Baxter (1954-1966), and a line of predecessors dating to A. Floridus Steele (1867-1893).

While parish history dates to the 19th century, the St. Mark's we know today grew out of turbulent times in the 1950s. The parish was dying then, a result of changing demographics and economics of post-war Washington. Many members had fled to the suburbs. The Bishop of Washington saw Bill Baxter as possibly the parish's last rector.

But instead of folding, St. Mark's flourished. Under Rev. Baxter, the parish reawakened, opened up, and reached out. It began its trademark worship in the round, welcomed (uneasily) its first African-American member, embraced dance and drama, connected with the broader Capitol Hill community, and pioneered functional Christian education (based on the teachings of the St. Louis-based educator Charles Penniman).

Jim Adams was a Baxter protégé and built on his innovations. During his tenure, worship incorporated a truly open communion, dance and drama took shape as the Dance Studio and St. Mark's Players, community service led to participation in the Washington Interfaith

Network and Capitol Hill Group Ministries, and outreach went abroad with a cluster of sister congregations in Honduras as well as Lichfield, England.

Above all, however, under Rev. Adams Christian education became the center of life at St. Mark's. Some 90% of parishioners took the adult Confirmation Class. Combining personal testimony and Christian symbols, the discipline provided a practicum for personal spiritual growth and bonded participants in community.

Paul Abernathy has embraced the St. Mark's of openness and authenticity and has modeled them in his preaching and teaching. With his leadership, St. Mark's has begun looking at extending these traditional qualities into new domains. From his 2006-2007 sabbatical, with travel to Europe and Africa, Rev. Abernathy has brought back a message of engagement with the broader world. He has guided the parish into open dialogue around issues of race. He has also invited the parish to consider radical hospitality, not just to be open to others' joining us in community but also to be open to being changed by their presence among us.

St. Mark's in 2009 is thus a parish with potential to explore new directions. This strategic plan, in various goals and objectives, speaks to new engagement both inside and outside the parish. There is, however, a discernible tension that the parish now experiences and will strive to live into: both ministering to ourselves and reaching out to others in the world.

Through faith, we will.

Note of explanation: The logic and flow of the St. Mark's strategy track this guiding question: Given who we are (ethos) and what we're about (mission), and considering the pressing issues facing us (challenges), what is it that we are seeking to do (goals) and, in particular, to focus on (priorities) now?

ETHOS

*Open and questioning minds,
open and challenging hearts,
open and caring hands.*

Openness is a palpable practice at St. Mark's that begin when we dare to confront the meaning of our existence by owning and telling our stories and listening to the stories of others. This mutual inquiry and reflection nurtures a culture of tolerance and acceptance that extends to all aspects of parish life, including the open communion. The disposition to be open to others forms the foundation on which we welcome newcomers and reach out into the world to engage in dialogue and service.

MISSION

St. Mark's Episcopal Church is an open community, welcoming people wherever they are on their faith journey. We celebrate the gifts of God that empower us to engage boldly in the struggles of life and care for others with love, justice, and compassion.

CHALLENGES

- ❖ Consequences of the recession: unemployment, reduced wealth, financial insecurity
- ❖ Shifting parish demographics: growth at the ends (retiring parishioners, young families) and lack of growth in the middle
- ❖ Downward trend in pledges and pledging households
- ❖ Tight parish budgets
- ❖ Volunteer fatigue
- ❖ Didactic vs. experiential (functional) education
- ❖ Administrative tasks and operational

inefficiencies: less time for parish ministry

- ❖ High-maintenance historic building
- ❖ Church activity outpacing space availability
- ❖ Looming capital campaign for building expansion.

GOALS

- ❖ Boosting membership
- ❖ Shoring up parish finances
- ❖ Reaching out to "the other" and to those in need
- ❖ Building community
- ❖ Communicating effectively with external audiences
- ❖ Preserving, and maximizing use of, our physical space
- ❖ Continuing innovation in worship
- ❖ Supporting our clergy
- ❖ Recruiting new parish leaders
- ❖ Streamlining parish administration
- ❖ Enhancing Christian education
- ❖ Maintaining robust youth and family programs.

PRIORITIES

Given the economic hardship that confronts our country and our community, St. Mark's will focus during 2009-2010 on securing our membership and finances while extending a helping hand to those in need both inside and outside our parish.

ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH GOALS

1. BOOSTING MEMBERSHIP

Sustaining a growing and financially stable congregation committed to carrying out the St. Mark's mission depends on continual renewal of church membership. Retaining current and attracting new members are equally important. At the same time, St. Mark's strives to be an open and welcoming church with greater diversity in the congregation. We seek to benefit from the life experiences and perspectives that parishioners of different races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations can bring.

Therefore, we will:

- ❖ Form a Membership Development Committee as a standing committee of the vestry, charged with implementing strategies to maintain current and grow new church membership.
- ❖ Provide a welcoming spirit, with active clergy and lay support, so that old and new members as well as visitors experience radical hospitality.
- ❖ Develop and implement targeted activities to encourage bonding across the parish so that everyone feels a sense of community in large and small groups.
- ❖ Involve all members in the active life and work of the church to further a sense of welcome, bonding, and fellowship.
- ❖ Listen to, document, and follow-up the needs and interests of parishioners and visitors to ensure the concerns of all are reflected in the daily life of the church.

2. SHORING UP PARISH FINANCES

The economic downturn coupled with shifts in parish demographics have reduced giving and depressed church finances. Pledges and pledging households are down, and the recession may impact fulfillment of some pledges. Fortunately, spending is also down, and there are reassuring signs of some new 2009 pledges and plate income. Yet this is a time of fiscal discipline and vigilance. While longer-term it is imperative to

grow parish membership, there is an immediate need to solidify parish finances.

Therefore, we will:

- ❖ Exercise fiscal discipline, monitoring expenses and income closely through the Finance Committee with Vestry oversight and support.
- ❖ Communicate openly with the parish about the financial situation.
- ❖ Prioritize and energize the annual parish canvass, applying lessons learned from prior experiences.

3. REACHING OUT TO "THE OTHER" AND TO THOSE IN NEED

St. Mark's is committed to engaging more fully in the wider world – both to enter into dialogue with those whose beliefs and behaviors are different from ours and to lend a helping hand to the needy. This emphasis responds to the call from our rector based in part on his 2006-2007 sabbatical experience and our parish's growing social consciousness. At the same time, given the economic crisis, people in our parish, on Capitol Hill, and beyond are suffering. We can and should play a role in helping them.

Therefore, we will:

- ❖ Continue our internal dialogue on racism and racial reconciliation.
- ❖ Attract guest preachers and teachers to nurture our understanding of what it means to be an open and welcoming community.
- ❖ Sustain our work in feeding the hungry at Church of the Brethren.
- ❖ Maintain our mission(s) to Honduras.
- ❖ Strengthen our partnership with Capitol Hill Group Ministry
- ❖ Seek new opportunities to engage in dialogue with other faith communities.

❖ Engage public schools on Capitol Hill through St. Mark's arts programs.

❖ Support fellow parishioners in need with resume and employment guidance and counseling.

4. BUILDING COMMUNITY

In the parish survey of 2004, community was the number one reason people gave for being part of St. Mark's. Friendship, fellowship, and a sense of belonging all derive from community. To achieve these, relationships need to form and develop. St. Mark's is filled with activity but not always with opportunity for meaningful engagement. We need to be intentional about nurturing the latter. And, when fissures in the community emerge, we need to address them through deliberate discourse.

Therefore, we will:

❖ Acknowledge and enhance the community building benefits of parish small-group experiences in classes, affinity groups, outreach, etc.

❖ Stimulate greater social interaction – time just to be together.

❖ Create inter-generational exchange – e.g., integrating the 20s/30s and Third-Agers.

❖ Reinstate the practice of pledging commitments to St. Mark's as a condition of membership.

❖ Care for those in the community with health and other needs.

❖ Acknowledge the tensions that are a natural, and can be a life-giving, part of being in community, such as wanting to be a place for both individual spiritual development and engagement in the wider world.

❖ Enter actively into dialogue around these tensions as a means of appreciating diverse interests and enhancing shared commitments.

5. COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH EXTERNAL AUDIENCES

St. Mark's seeks to reach out beyond our walls to engage in service for and dialogue with others,

and to attract new members. Good external communication is important to our outreach. We need to let the larger community know who we are and what we are up to, and to invite others to come in and join us. This necessitates being more focused in our communications strategies and to think “outside of the box” to ensure we reach the widest possible audience.

Therefore, we will:

❖ Advertise in local media in a consistent fashion.

❖ Coordinate across St. Mark's groups that place their own ads or otherwise promote their activities.

❖ Send media advisories to local outlets on a regular basis to promote special events and stimulate interest in parish activities.

❖ Extend the outreach beyond the newspapers to online and other outlets.

❖ Ensure the church website is fresh and up-to-date (today's church shopping happens online).

❖ Post the web site outside the building as part of the wooden signs or as a banner.

6. PRESERVING AND MAXIMIZING USE OF OUR PHYSICAL SPACE

Our late 19th-century building is an architectural gem and integral part of Capitol Hill life. Its stately presence extends an inviting, spiritual welcome. Yet, at its age, it requires frequent maintenance and preservation, not always possible with limited financial resources. At the same time, growing church activity is taxing the available space. Expanding our building, and carrying out the capital campaign to fund it, will likely be necessary in coming years and require substantial advance planning.

Therefore, we will:

❖ Maximize availability and use of existing space, including removing unnecessary items from the church.

❖ Encourage parishioners' initiatives towards repairs, painting, planting, and similar activities that enhance the building and the grounds.

- ❖ Ensure all groups and activities that use St. Mark's facilities do so in a responsible and respectful manner.
- ❖ Anticipate building expansion with the first step: preparing a sound space plan.
- ❖ Work to establish the conditions for a successful capital campaign, including understanding of the need, support for the plan, and consensus to raise the funds.

7. CONTINUING INNOVATION IN WORSHIP

At St. Mark's, clergy and laity partner to design meaningful and innovative worship services. Recently, worship planning transitioned from a seasonal task force approach, with a core group plan a year at a time. This approach will encourage deeper understanding of the liturgical seasons as they convey the entirety of the Christian story as well as allow others to participate at times of greatest interest to them.

Therefore, we will:

- ❖ Continue to refine the worship planning team approach and publicize the worship planning process while encouraging parishioner participation.
- ❖ Support in worship the parish dialogue on race and reconciliation by including other forms of worship, guest preachers, and music in services.
- ❖ Enrich our worship by including the St. Mark's Players, Dance Studio, Outreach Board, and other church groups.
- ❖ Study the need for a third Sunday service in response to parishioner needs.

8. SUPPORTING OUR CLERGY

Our rector and assistant rector sustain our community spiritually and administratively. Long are their hours and many are the demands on their time and attention. Increasingly, both clergy seek greater community service as part of their ministry. Supporting them in this and their parish work requires appropriate staff as well as strong lay support. This necessitates increased clarity on the roles of clergy and laity.

Therefore, we will:

- ❖ Facilitate the clergy's personal involvement in community outreach.
- ❖ Ensure our new assistant rector is integral to the life of our community.
- ❖ Begin a dialogue among clergy and lay leaders on their respective roles and those of the staff.

9. RECRUITING PARISH LEADERS AND VOLUNTEERS

A hallmark of St. Mark's is active lay involvement. Many parish programs require lay participation for their survival. Renewing the pool of volunteers on a regular basis is essential but a time-consuming and challenging task. Work and family constraints limit availability of many parishioners, especially those with young children. When parishioners feel a strong sense of community and can see the personal benefit in getting involved participation rises. We need to highlight the promises and limit the costs of volunteering.

Therefore, we will:

- ❖ Reach out assertively to invite parishioners to assume leadership and volunteer roles.
- ❖ Study the range of volunteer positions to know the magnitude of the requirement.
- ❖ Minimize the actual number of volunteers needed for given parish assignments to avoid redundancy.
- ❖ Catalogue the volunteer assignments (their duration and availability) to advise parishioners of relevant opportunities for them.
- ❖ Find limited, task-specific assignments for newcomers and those with limited time.
- ❖ Hold up our lay leaders and volunteers for thanks and praise.

10. STRENGTHENING PARISH ADMINISTRATION

Administratively, St. Mark's resembles a small business with some 700 "customers." The church requires a fully functioning office that provides administrative support for our clergy in their service to the parish. Guided by the rector, the vestry has been in continuing conversation

about how to optimize use of office staff and technology to free clergy for pastoral care and other duties.

Therefore, we will:

- ❖ Review and strengthen the staff infrastructure (with a view toward achieving newly defined Parish Administrator and Parish Assistant positions).
- ❖ Relieve clergy of delegable administrative tasks.
- ❖ Continue to delegate to staff the range of routine duties such as overseeing maintenance, making space reservations, managing church databases, preparing weekly bulletins, etc.

11. ENHANCING CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

The Christian education program is a major church pillar that plays a special role in facilitating spiritual growth, building community, and conveying the St. Mark's ethos. But, for multiple reasons (some external to the program), it has witnessed reduced levels of vibrancy and relevance in recent years. The Life, Community, and Faith (LCF) class, a means for newcomers to enter into life at St. Marks, has met with praise by participants, but has not been as well subscribed as it could be. Issues regarding the effectiveness of Sunday school have arisen. At the same time, many of the program's core participants – teachers, supervisors, and other volunteers – are advancing into a new demographic, requiring the injection of new blood.

Therefore, we will:

- ❖ Revitalize Life, Community, and Faith as a gateway class and primer in St. Mark's-style theological reflection, ensuring it is adequately subscribed on a year-to-year basis.
- ❖ Ensure LCF figures in the parish membership plan and receives parish-wide support.

- ❖ Continue to match class offerings to parish needs and interests and find ways to make them relevant and accessible (cost, duration, etc.).

- ❖ Review and revamp, as necessary, the Sunday school program – to meet the expectations of parents and the needs of the children.

- ❖ Rebuild the Christian education corps, expanding the number and ensuring proper training of teachers and supervisors for the near and long term.

12. MAINTAINING ROBUST YOUTH AND FAMILY PROGRAMS

St. Mark's youth programs, under our youth director and with active parental support, have blossomed in the last two years. They have built community for our children, enriched their spiritual lives, engaged their parents more fully in parish life, forged relationships among families and youth leaders, and provided an attractive feature for newcomers with children seeking a church home. The parish seeks to keep the programs alive and growing as we transition to a new youth director.

Therefore, we will:

- ❖ Preserve the current team structure and volunteer staffing (i.e., strong involvement by both parents and other parishioners) to maintain a solid infrastructure and program of coordinated activities for our children.
- ❖ Maintain active collaboration between the Christian education program (Sunday school, particularly) and the youth and family program so that the efforts of each can be mutually supportive.
- ❖ Promote information-sharing and collaboration between the parish Pillars and the youth program so that our children and their families are integrated into the activities of the larger community.

ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

3rd and A Streets SE, Washington, DC 20003 ❖ 202-543-0043 ❖ www.StMarks.net