



St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

January 12, 2023

Dogwood Preschool to move to St. Stephen's Church in July 2023

Leaders of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church and Dogwood Preschool are thrilled to announce that they have reached an agreement which will bring Dogwood's program to St. Stephen's, using the classroom spaces used by St. Stephen's Preschool until 2020.

For 50 years, St. Stephen's was home to an outstanding preschool for the benefit of the children of the parish and the wider community. In 2020, the school closed temporarily as the COVID-19 pandemic affected public and private schools throughout the United States. Later that year St. Stephen's announced the preschool would remain closed for the 2020-21 school year and that a decision on its future would follow a period of discernment.

During that time, Dogwood Preschool was born, growing out of a desire by families and staff of the former St. Stephen's Preschool to continue and build on the work of that beloved program. Its approach, philosophy and even some of its leaders and staff will be familiar to those who've had a past relationship with the church's preschool.

The Rev. John Rohrs, who arrived as rector of St. Stephen's in early September 2022, notes that during the 'meet and greet' sessions taking place throughout the fall, "the preschool came up again and again."

He says, "It was clear to me how meaningful the preschool ministry had been for many of our parishioners."

During this time, Andy Luke, a member of the vestry, current junior warden, and a former president of the St. Stephen's Preschool board of advisors, had stayed in touch with many in the former preschool community, including leadership at Dogwood.

"We did not begin conversations with Dogwood with any expectation of their move to St. Stephen's, but to engage its leaders and the broader preschool community in conversation. Many were saddened by the loss of the preschool and hopeful that one day it might return. But we knew we first needed to heal as a community before moving forward."

Andy continues, "Along the way we learned from Dogwood leadership that the program was growing and needed more space. The team indicated that the space once occupied by St. Stephen's Preschool would be ideal as it had been designed for that purpose."

Still, says John, “We took things slowly, wanting to be sure that we were doing this for the right reasons. The decision couldn’t be driven by nostalgia; it had to be the right choice for Dogwood and for St. Stephen’s.”

“As an independent school,” says John, “they’ve done tremendous work in establishing themselves as Dogwood School over these last few years. We had to determine what a new partnership would look like, and how we would share space and decisions and resources.”

Dogwood will lease space downstairs in our parish house, with the initial three-year term, beginning July 1.

“We have every intention of this being a long-term relationship with leases that renew over time,” says John.

The school is recognized by the Virginia Department of Education as a licensed Child Day Center. The Dogwood School, Inc. doing business as Dogwood Preschool is a Virginia non-stock corporation recognized as a tax-exempt non-profit under section 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Code. It is governed by a board of directors.

When Dogwood moves to St. Stephen’s, it will continue as an independent preschool located at St. Stephen’s Church and will continue to have its own board of directors. The rector of St. Stephen’s or his designee will have a seat on that board, as will a current vestry member.

The school will be known as Dogwood Preschool at St. Stephen’s.

Dogwood provides high-quality early childhood education to children of residents of greater Richmond. Each classroom offers age-appropriate educational choices designed to draw in each individual child. Choices include cognitive, fine motor, gross motor, practical life, art, music, reading, and more. The program is based on the best features of well-regarded early childhood education philosophies including Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Piaget.

Dogwood Preschool is a non-denominational Christian preschool and children are offered the foundational principles of Christianity through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd—the same Montessori-based spiritual formation program St. Stephen’s Church uses. Dogwood celebrates and embraces children from any religious or non-religious background.

John expressed thanks to wardens Dick Hamrick and Andy Luke for their diligence during the discernment process. “They have worked tirelessly to balance this great opportunity with the needs and interests of the church.”

John also expresses deep gratitude to Dogwood Preschool’s director and St. Stephen’s parishioner Kate Batten, board chair Kari Teagno Hyman, and program director Marion Chenault. Marion is a St. Stephen’s parishioner and served as director of St. Stephen’s Preschool until her retirement in 2019.

“They have been so faithful throughout this process and they represent the wonderful leadership and future of this school.”

Kate and Kari echo the enthusiasm of St. Stephen’s leadership. “We are so excited, and look forward to making a new home at St. Stephen’s Church,” Kate says; Kari agrees, adding, “St. Stephen’s has been a pleasure to work with.”

John notes that this new arrangement “will be different than it was before when St. Stephen’s managed a preschool as one of its own ministries, but that’s not a bad thing. At my last church we leased space to an independent preschool that had been there for more than 80 years. We had the benefits of a great partnership but the church didn’t have the challenges of managing and financing the program, hiring teachers, and so forth. It worked really well there and I think it will work well here.”

“I am really excited about this partnership. We toured the school and saw their students and teachers. We know they will bring great joy and life to our classrooms downstairs, and we look forward to inviting those children and families into the fuller life of St. Stephen’s, if they are interested.”

Parents who are interested in applying for a place for their children at Dogwood Preschool @ St. Stephen’s should contact the school directly; information is at **dogwoodpreschool.org**.

As he thinks about this new relationship and the name of the new preschool to which St. Stephen’s will be home, John reflects on the legend of the dogwood tree:

“Some people find meaning in the marks of the dogwood flowers and their resemblance to a cross, in conjunction with their blooming time around Easter. It’s not lost on me that after a difficult departure from St. Stephen’s Church, the Dogwood Preschool was reborn—resurrected, you might say—and is now coming back to be a source of new life on our campus.”

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