

St. Stephen's 2025 Annual Parish Meeting

The Rev. John D. Rohrs: Rector's Report

Words of gratitude

I want to begin, as always, with words of gratitude. I am grateful for our outgoing vestry class, and especially for the leadership of the vestry officers. Anne Pinion has been a terrific senior warden. She is so diligent and dedicated and thoughtful, always putting the interests of St. Stephen's first. She's been a wonderful sounding board and guide, and so supportive of me and of our whole staff. Jeff Johnson has done generous double duty as a junior warden and as a vestry representative to Dogwood Preschool during these critical first two years. And Whitney Van Der Hyde, Chris Smith, and Andy Luke have been outstanding members of that executive team as well. Thank you to all of them (Chris has one more year on the vestry) and to Brenda McDowell as well, who also finishes her faithful term of service today.

I'm also grateful for our staff. It has been a rough start to 2025! Like many of you, we lost water for a week, we have had weekly snow closings—I'm tired of my own emails!—and we have had an unbelievable stretch of funerals to start the year. I think we have had 15 or 16 funerals already in 2025, and that really takes an emotional toll. It's been a hard and stressful time, and that makes me all the more grateful for the teamwork and talent and dedication of our staff to continue to pull together programs and worship and ministries in the midst of it all.

I want to share a special word of gratitude for Fred Staley. As you saw in our e-Spirit announcement on Thursday, Fred has taken a position as a CFO of a Methodist Conference in his native land of East Tennessee. It brings him closer to his son and his extended family after a hard year in their lives and I'm glad for him. But don't get me wrong; I'm sad for us! Fred has been an outstanding executive director and colleague and friend.

When he was interviewing here in 2022, I remember us walking together into the church. It was the first time he had seen the interior and he noted to me that he recognized the marble flooring in the chancel, because that particular stone comes from the quarry that his family business mined when he was growing up. It strikes me as fitting that Fred's two plus years here really helped solidify a strong and sturdy foundation for St. Stephen's for years to come. He helped streamline and build out our financial and operational systems and procedures in a way that will help us feel confident in the growth and stability of our next chapter here.

I'm sure you have lots of questions about how we will move forward. Rest assured, that we are working hard on transition plans and we will have more to share soon. It will very likely be a combination of current staff juggling a few extra balls and some additional, part-time staff helping us during a hopefully short interim period as we ramp up a search for Fred's replacement. Stay tuned for more details.

Speaking of staff juggling, I want to say on a happier note how glad I am for the sabbatical policy and other staff wellness initiatives that Anne highlighted. I'm excited for Will Stanley to get a well-deserved time of renewal this summer, and again—rest assured that we are putting plans in place to make that as smooth a time as possible in his absence.

New staff updates: Director of Outreach and Engagement coming soon!

I am delighted to say that having met and surpassed our annual giving financial goal—thanks to your generosity—we have moved forward with the search process for a new Director of Outreach and Engagement. We had 25 or 30 solid applicants, and we whittled that down to a handful for first and second round interviews. As we speak, we are down to a couple of terrific finalists. Donnan O'Keefe, chair of the Outreach Committee, and Anna Jones, our farmers market and food ministries coordinator, have been great partners with me in the search and interview process.

In this final round, candidates are also spending time with other members of the outreach committee and with additional members of the senior staff. I am very hopeful that we'll have someone in place in the coming month or two at the latest and then we'll have a whole process of on-boarding them and setting up focus group conversations with you and with our community partners to really engage and envision the future of our outreach ministries.

We also have a few pieces of happy news related to our support for people in the ordination exploration process in our diocese. In January, the vestry endorsed Bart Natoli for candidacy, which is the last step before ordination. He is finishing his seminary degree at Bexley Seabury, even as he continues to teach full-time in the classics department at Randolph Macon. Bart is on track to be ordained this fall and begin a bi-vocational ministry as a professor and priest, probably in or near the Ashland area.

We also are in the final steps of signing a letter of agreement to bring a seminarian intern to be with us for 40 hours per week over the course of eight weeks this summer. This is part of the ordination process in our diocese and it's exactly the kind of learning and formation opportunity that we should be providing at a church the

size and scope of St. Stephen's. It is not official yet but should be soon and I will look forward to introducing you to the intern who will be with us in June and July.

Living out our mission, vision, and values

Finally, I want to close by emphasizing our mission, vision, and values. In some ways, crafting and embracing a mission, vision, and values for St. Stephen's is the most important thing we did this past year, and I am very grateful for the vestry's help and support in that process. Here, again, is that mission and vision:

We are a community of hospitality, healing, and hope, sharing the love of Christ.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." We gather at God's table to receive that bread and then we go out in love to share it with others, setting tables of hospitality, healing, and hope. Together, we aspire to a world where everyone has a seat at the table and all are fed.

These grounding words helped us navigate a contentious election season in the fall and come together in the Week of Compassion. They helped us find common language and purpose. But that was never about one week or one season. It was about our life together, all the time, and things have not gotten any less contentious in our country at the start of 2025. Our mission, vision, and values will continue to guide us, as I noted in the parish email I sent a few weeks back. We will need to continue to uphold those values and put them into tangible practice by setting tables of hospitality, healing, and hope, prioritizing our care for those who are vulnerable or hurting or living on the margins.

Our recent hospitality workshop is one example of how we will live out our mission and values. On that Sunday afternoon a few weeks ago, more than one hundred parishioners attended a workshop to think and share together about the spiritual practice of hospitality. Forty more people are on the wait list for a second planned workshop. I want to give a shout out to John Jenkins and members of the hospitality committee for their work, which is about how we welcome the stranger and share the love of Christ, within these doors and far beyond.

Healing is another key word in our mission and vision. We are just wrapping up a four-week Sunday Forum series on mental health and wellness, which complements many of our programs and ministries—like support for 12-step and recovery ministries, centering prayer and small groups, yoga classes, and more. We have also deepened our focus on the spirituality and experience of aging through a Wednesday evening course and a planned set of small groups. Our racial healing work continues to deepen (thanks to Cate Anthony for her leadership here) as does our embrace of

the care and healing of creation. In each case, that work has never been more important than it is today. Finally, I very often meet people who find healing through the beautiful worship and music of our liturgies, particularly in the evening Celtic and Compline services.

The final key word in our mission is hope. Before I speak about hope, though, I first want to note what keeps me up at night. What keeps me up at night is the persistence of poverty and racism and injustice in our country and in our world. It keeps me up worrying about the future we are handing to our children. More specifically, in light of our shared context and my chosen vocation, I worry about the pervasive distortion of Christianity in this country. In too many places in the public square, I see a form of Christianity that focuses on personal salvation and prosperity and triumphalism, allowing division, discrimination, and inequity to grow. This is a far cry from the Christianity of Jesus. His life and teaching in the gospels is focused on communal care and on building the dream and vision of God's kingdom, where everyone has a seat at the banquet and all are fed.

What gives me hope, though, are the ways each week in which we live out that gospel vision through our mission and values. I see it in the depth and reach of our food ministries and other outreach activities; I see it in our embrace of hospitality and healing through our evening services and adult formation; I see it in the Palmer Hall community, bursting at the seams and forming children in faith; I see it in our deep care for one another, friend and stranger alike. There are lots of reasons to hope, especially when we ground our hope in Jesus—in his actual life, a life of unyielding love in the face of division and death. These past weeks we have been listening to passages from his great sermon on the plain, the sermon that provides his vision of a world turned upside down and right side up. That vision gives us a place to stand and a foundation for hope, and I am so grateful to stand there with you.