

Rector's Annual Report 2021
St. James Episcopal Church
January 31, 2021

In preparation for writing my annual report, I always read the report I gave the prior year. I did that same thing in preparation for writing this report and I thought I was reading something from another century. In that report I talked about the improvements we did to the building and the rectory and how the building is a sign of what is going on inside. Little did I know that we would be unable to meet and worship in our building for most of the rest of 2020. Little did I know that we would have to put into practice the saying that a church is more than a building...the church is the people.

And we proved, and continue to prove, that the church is the people and when “two or three are gathered” in Jesus’ name—even over Zoom—Jesus is present.

How can I report to you on the state of St. James in a year that has been like no other in my lifetime? From pandemic, to upheaval in the other Washington; from no students on campus to no football parking; from empty pews to learning the ins and outs of virtual worship and meetings; as I often say, and even more often think, “they never taught us this in seminary!”

And I am here to report to you that St. James is not just surviving but thriving in this most unusual time! As is our custom, we have found new ways to be together, new ways to worship while keeping our Episcopal heritage intact and we’ve continued to form and deepen us in The Way of Love—as our Presiding Bishop calls our following of Jesus.

A few of the highlights as I see them include the March 8 visitation by our Bishop and daughter of St. James, Gretchen Rehberg. That was the last time we worshipped in person; in the way we were used to. After that, we started various forms of online worship. We initially thought that we might be able to gather in person again by Easter; then Pentecost; and finally realized that this Covid-19 pandemic was a serious one and we could not envision when we might go back to the way things were. In the summer, we did have in-person worship with reservations taken to limit capacity and appropriate masking and social distancing, but that had to end in mid-August when the cases of the virus in Pullman surged way beyond what they had been in the spring.

As of this date, we have continued to worship online via Zoom. We currently send out the Sunday bulletin via email to all those who have shared their contact info. For those who have not given us an email, we send the bulletin via the postal service. My hope is that those who cannot or would prefer to not join us on Zoom can pray the Sunday readings and prayers on their own. Those who have attended the Sunday Eucharists via Zoom have noted that they like this better than the livestreamed versions done in other ways. There is at least a sense that you are worshipping with the community. We see each other and can interact with each other as appropriate.

I would be hard pressed to even guess when we may be able to worship in person again—even with limiting numbers and appropriate precautions. That decision will be made in consultation with the vestry and I fully expect that we will still provide some form of online worship at the same time. At that point we will see what is possible given the amount of tech support we have to make it happen. As I have talked about with the vestry, what is theoretically possible is not always feasible given that I cannot be both in front of and behind the camera at the same time. There have been several people who have helped as we have gone along the

way in our online services: Charlie and Kaylee Hammerich, Gia Gordon and Elena Panchenko with music.

Meanwhile, the other gatherings and ministries of the church continue but in different ways. We have transferred Lectionary Studies and the Adult Forum to Zoom and continue to meet as always. We have also started a new program from the Diocese called “Come Follow Me” which is a deeper exploration of the Episcopal faith and ministry. This is also being held via Zoom. The Vestry has continued to meet monthly on Zoom as well. It is very convenient to not have to worry about inclement weather or driving in the dark and yet there is something missing when we don’t meet in person; after all, we are a very incarnational faith. And yet, I am grateful to all those who have bravely ventured forth into a part of cyberspace that they never knew before—and I might speculate that some of them actually like it!

One bit of business that started over a year ago (or was it 2?) that is about to come to completion is our stained-glass windows. If you recall, they were vandalized, broken, including the coverings that were made to protect them. Well, I am happy to say that they are now repaired and are scheduled to be installed the last week of February! Halleluiah! We will let you know when the installation is complete and will then schedule a time for a celebration and blessing—not on Zoom I might add!

I encourage you to read the Annual Reports submitted by the various ministries of the congregation. They give a good overall picture of the year that has passed. I want to thank those who submitted the reports and the ongoing work of the various committees and ministries.

My biggest question is where do we go from here? We hope and pray that this pandemic will be under control in 2021 and then will we just go back to the way things were? I think there are some of us who think that is exactly what will happen. I am not one of them. I think this pandemic, and the accompanying upheaval in our country will continue to have an effect on our country, and our church going forward. I cannot predict the future—another one of the things they didn’t teach me in seminary—but I do think I can name a few things that we will be dealing with this coming year and beyond.

First of all, our diocese received a grant to establish pastoral care centers in the 4 regions of the diocese and one of those centers is to be based out of St James. The project is called Community of Hope and its aim is to train lay people to be pastoral care givers—meaning people who will walk with another through a difficult time whether that be visiting in hospitals, nursing homes or shut-ins; talking regularly with someone who is having challenges and changes through divorce, raising children and various other life crises; to phone those who are alone and various other ways to help one another. It is to supplement the ministry of priests and deacons and in some ways is the same that some of you do just naturally. But this group, Community of Hope will also support each other in this ministry—praying with and for this group of ministers. We will be recruiting our first class in the next few months for the initial training. We also hope to partner with St. Mark’s and Nativity if they have people ready to be trained—that is the regional part of this project. I ask you to consider if you may be called to try this ministry of listening and being present to those who need extra help.

Another issue that we will be dealing with in this coming year is the continuing racial and economic disparity in our country. I don’t think the people who attacked the Capitol in DC carrying confederate flags will go away just because some of them are being arrested and tried. We know there is a great divide in this country: we are a country of great wealth and

staggering poverty; we are a country that continues to ignore racial issues that we have had since the 1600's, before we were even a nation. And whether we want to believe it or not, even Pullman has its issues as we saw this year with the number of people needing food banks and those who will not have even the promise of a job until this pandemic is long gone.

There are various ways we can engage with these issues and realities; some we are already doing by our involvement with feeding people, Family Promise, and the books we have read in the Adult Forum. But the issue of race is bigger than any individual; it is a systemic problem that must involve the healing of our national character. Just because the problem is big doesn't mean we can't engage it—and with the knowledge that we can only do so much—but at least we can do our little part. I hope to bring some of our national church's programs on Becoming the Beloved Community to St. James in the coming year. You will hear more about it as we go along.

I also wonder and pray about how we can have a bigger influence on campus. We are supporting a campus minister who is working with another church and we appreciate Caitlyn's keeping us informed about her work with students. I have also had meetings with a group from campus who wants to have a space for ministry of various types to occur, much like what I hear about the old Koinonia House. And still, I pray about how we, a progressive Christian denomination can make a different impression on these students about Christianity than what they hear and see in the media of "Christian Nationalist" and "fundamentalist judgment". I wonder if we don't have an opportunity before us to bring in the Episcopal Service Core with the opening up of the space now occupied by the Childcare Center in the next 3-5 years. I pray and wonder—how about you?

And one last thing—in September of 2021 I will have been here at St. James for 5 years. According to diocesan policy I am due for a 3-month sabbatical. This is a time for me to recharge my batteries but also a time for the congregation to recharge as well. I am hoping to apply for an Eli Lilly Clergy renewal grant that would not only finance my sabbatical but would also pay for the church to have renewal while I am away. One of the charges for the vestry this year will be discerning what that church renewal will look like. As I continue in my fifth year here, I am excited for all that we have left to accomplish including our goals that have been put on hold—like remodeling the kitchen in the Parish Hall and planting a renewable garden that will reflect the native plantings on the Palouse and be a welcoming place for our neighbors.

Yes, when two or three are gathered in God's name, Jesus is present—via Zoom or in person! And God is certainly not finished with us yet here at St. James. Let us continue to pray that God will guide us and send us into a world that is in dire need of peace and healing. Amen.