

Well, the new year has arrived. We have seen some wonderful things transpire this past year that are helping to shape our direction as we move ahead. What a joy to celebrate two services on Christmas Eve, both of which were very well attended (there were 69 at each service). Although they were very different, both were joyful celebrations of the birth of our Lord Jesus. Now let's take a quick look back at some of those things that are helping to reveal where we're headed in the year to come.

A few months ago, we began participation in a program called Angel Food. As you now know, this program ceased operations and left us to pick up the pieces of what had appeared to be a very promising outreach ministry. Interest in this program (or something like it) and the proximity of a community who could be helped by it showed us that such a ministry could be an important part of our outreach here at St. Mark's, but certainly not the only one.

Shortly after I arrived here, people began to tell me about the talented young people that were a part of the church and wondering aloud whether we might create an alternative worship experience with and for them. Recognizing our need to grow as a congregation and in particular the relative lack of younger people among us, this idea seemed to have merit. The only question was, did we really have what it would take to make it go.

Our son Jake stepped up and offered to work with the young people as worship leader to see what we could develop. Sam Whitlow came onboard to play drums and Jack Follansbee joined in on guitar. Jake convinced his brother Adam to play bass and they all began to practice together. Our initial vision was to hold a special event that would include both Christian and secular music as an introduction to an alternative service to attract younger people. It soon became clear that this idea was not immediately workable for us and someone suggested that we plug our new youth band into the third Sunday Rite II service.

The response we received to that first service was overwhelming. There was even the suggestion that we completely switch our worship pattern and only do Rite I on the third Sunday! The response to our contemporary service has continued to be very positive and I have tried to incorporate some additional variety in using the different patterns of prayer available in Rite II. It appears that this form of worship will be a key part of our strategy in the coming year. I have no intention of completely abandoning Rite I, but I have been greatly encouraged at how willing people have been to consider and make changes to help our parish to grow.

With the demise of Angel Food, some of your vestry members began to research alternatives. It turns out that the church in Derry that was our pickup point for Angel Food became a partner in starting another similar program. It appears that this program might be a suitable replacement and allow us to move ahead with our food outreach ideas.

We now have a Facebook page. It is vitally important for us to take advantage of new and

popular ways of communicating and interacting with people. Check out St. Mark's Episcopal Church on Facebook. Our page will be a great way to generate interest and help people to know who we are. We even have video! Our contemporary Christmas Eve service is posted to the page in video form. I hope you will take a look.

Now, some additional thoughts on the year to come: Our need to grow is obvious as is our need to attract people from broader demographics to our services. While having some additional options or even completely different patterns of worship available are important, they will not be enough on their own. We need to think strategically in terms of how we use our resources and in particular identify who in our community we can reach with the gospel and how it is that God has equipped us to reach them. While all the practical considerations and ideas are important, we must keep our God-given mission to proclaim the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ first.

One of the needs I have encountered during my hospice ministry is for people to connect their faith and biblical teaching to the events of their own lives. Folks may hear good sermons, but unless the messages address the issues and concerns they are dealing with, the connection is often lost. I plan to hold regular meetings (not exactly "Bible study") to address this need by providing an open forum in which people can ask questions and interact around questions and concerns with which they are currently dealing. Such gatherings will also provide an excellent venue to invite people from outside the church, especially non-believers.

I have been gathering some information on what has been done at St. Mark's in terms of Lenten programs in the past and considering what kind of options we have this year. If you have any particular ideas on this subject let me know, as I continue to evaluate what will be of greatest use to us. Stay tuned.

As you can see, this coming year has a great deal of promise and hope for all that God can and will do for us and with us. I remain very hopeful regarding our future. I covet your prayers and remind you to continue to prayer for your vestry and the developing ministries of St. Mark's. Of course in the spring we will elect a new bishop for our diocese and I have it on good authority that the slate of candidates is exceptional. It will certainly be a busy year. I count it a joy to be serving you during this time.

May the Lord richly bless you all in the coming year and our labor together for the sake of His gospel.

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