

St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
The Annual Address of the Priest-in-Charge  
Annual Meeting, January 23, 2022  
The Reverend Donald F. Davidson, D.Min.

We meet today as our collect indicated to take counsel, which means to listen closely and then to make choices, choices that are important. In the long run, I have found that Annual Meetings are pretty good about making choices and could work on the listening. Today I am addressing you all and not sermonizing so, relax, this will be wee bit longer. I will be speaking on a number of topics held together by the slimmest of transitions – our transition from one rector to the next.

Going on ten years ago, I made the decision to devote my remaining active years to the ministry of the intentional interim: a priest who serves for a short time and helps to prepare the parish for the arrival of a new seated Rector. While present, the Interim has the authority of a seated Rector with an expiration date. Just like things in your refrigerator, if an Interim stays too long they become a science experiment. As an Interim I will care and love you, pronounce blessings, celebrate the sacraments and prepare the parish for the coming rector.

The process of finding a new Rector can take as long as two-years but typically is from 12-18 months. We live in an interesting time when there are very few Episcopal churches which can currently afford full-time clergy, and there are fewer clergy who are willing to serve smaller, urban parishes.

Finding the right priest for the marriage of parish and rector is not easy and your search committee will need your help in making sure what you want is what you really want, and what you get is what you prayed to receive.

The Search Committee creates a profile which gives all the information that a potential candidate needs to know about Flint, about Michigan, about our Diocese and about the history and status of the parish.

The Committee looks seriously at what kind of financial package we can offer. This includes some very honest conversation about what this parish needs and what resources we have.

Bishop James Krotz of Nebraska said years ago that every parish, no matter the size has everything it needs for salvation. Every parish has everything it needs. There is theology, scripture, grace, love, tradition, believe even ecclesiology in that brief statement and it is (add here an expletive of your own) right.

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In these discussions it is easy to get confused about why we are here and what we are called to be and called to do. We have the most beautiful building in this community and diocese. Is that our calling? We have one of the most talented organists and director of music, we have a fantastic chancel and gospel choir... are we called to be a music center?

We have the best sexton with whom I have ever worked and a financial genius that manages our books. We are truly blessed. Is that our calling?

We all know this parish has great outreach. We are involved in the community as a sponsoring church for Crossroads, a founder of Whaley, our Tuesday lunch program, Family promise and our prayer-shawl and hat ministry. This is not about making us feel better, but being Christ, loving as Christ, sharing the grace of Christ with all people. It is also remembering that there are none of us who are loved less or loved more by God than any of us. Is that where we are called?

St. Paul's has been a liturgical leader in this Diocese with a goodly number of lay leaders, clergy, acolytes that know and love the pomp and beauty of traditional Anglican liturgy, praising God with style and grace. Is this our calling?

In conversations I am deeply impressed with the massive history of this parish, with members through out its 183 years who shaped Flint as well as the automobile industry, we have documents, artwork, books that speak to how much this parish meant to many people of years past. Our building stands proudly, and we will celebrate 150 years of worship, prayer, in these walls starting this coming May. Is being a historical center what we are called to be?

In a time when our nation knows better, when everything divides and where hate on any subject can cause distrust and divisiveness: we are a diverse congregation; more than some and less than others. St. Paul's has, in many ways moved out from the faux security of walls, and membership lists to the inclusivity of every person who enters, every person who touches this community is just as much a part of this community as anyone else. Certainly our patron would understand this as our calling, yet I am not sure that our neighborhood and community connections are as encompassing as they might be, or might become.

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Our hospitality, while real, is often understated. I believe we recognize even if we are not as intentional about our practice that the most important person is the person who has never been here before. We must push aside feelings and doubts and remember we are the body of Christ in this place, in this time. We are not a membership of the few, we are a community of the many. Is this our calling?

This parish has dipped it's toes in the baffling streams of issue oriented politics? Do we wish to be a parish whose hospitality is limited only to those who think like us?

About the only thing that we can rule-out as a potential mission or calling is survival. A mission of Survival points backward and can be self-centered and selfish and not Christ centered. The one place in all the earth where the Holy Spirit cannot go – is a closed mind; a mind unwilling to open a window and let the good news in.

Our work over the next year or less, is to answer the questions about our calling and to articulate the dreams of our people, listen, and pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

To do that we obviously must strike-out, push-aside, and frankly pulverize and bury for all eternity the seven last words of the church: "We've never done it that way before." We have reached the limit, the time is now, we cannot wait or put off it off, in the paraphrased words of the Borg for our Star Trek friends – "resistance [to change] is futile." We can learn and change, we can boldly go in new directions, or we can pay no attention to successful alternatives and resist which may lead to a perished parish.

I propose we begin a new phase in our preparation work with the acknowledgement that there have been errors in judgment, and some questionable lapses of Christian courtesy. For some my statement may be too much or too little.

Sometimes rectors and lay leaders do not always think about the feelings of another and can say the wrong thing to the wrong person at the wrong time. This can result in hurt feelings, and empty pews. At times people find that they feel worse when they get home from a church activity than they did before they left.

In the words of a Vacation Church School song:

*Refrain:  
I am the church! You are the church!  
We are the church together!  
All who follow Jesus,  
all around the world!  
Yes, we're the church together!*

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*1. The church is not a building;  
the church is not a steeple;  
the church is not a resting place;  
the church is a people.*

I have presented all the members of the Vestry the "Book of Forgiving" by the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. I have asked them to read it and I hope that you all check-in with your vestry members and keep them accountable.

Briefly, Forgiveness is our baptismal imperative. Forgetting is not a part of the equation as we may never forget. Reconciliation is our ultimate goal, not always possible, and it is honestly rare; it is putting everything back the way it was before.

Our Vestry will constitute a Peace and Reconciliation Commission. On dates to be announced, the Vestry will gather to listen and only to listen to those who wish to speak about their feelings regarding their involvement in our parish community. I must tread carefully in anything I say as I do not wish to create, but my challenge is to give voice to grievances, allow time to cry, and spread the welcome relief of sweet balm of Christian love, grace and understanding – something we call peace.

The first step is recognition, we know that people in this parish are beset with relationship indigestion – an unusual way of saying anger not resolved, failures not spoken, decisions less than optimum. This is a way of honoring the scripture... it is within our Peace and Reconciliation Commission that a person can give the gift of their deeply held feeling and through this act make peace with their brothers and their sisters.

I have committed and challenged the vestry to only listen, not debate or question; this is not an opportunity for church fencing but a call that we as a parish can change the generational systems of the past and begin a new chapter with a conviction that we will love.

"If it is about God, it about is love" Michael Curry our Presiding Bishop says. Let us welcome the next Rector with a conviction to look forward in love.

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I am pleased to announce today the appointment of Walt Peake as the Parish Archivist. Walt, who chairs our Stewardship Committee and is working hard on Intersection150 our year-long community-wide celebration of the anniversary of our building and our proud connection to our community, will be leading a new relationship with the University of Michigan Flint, so that our history can be easily found for generations to

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come. Walt's work in this area has been amazing, and I want him to have a position that is commensurate with the high respect we have for him as well as the pride we feel when thinking about our building, our community, and our future.

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As we prepare for the next rector, we will be asking for your help in completing surveys, attending informational gatherings, and providing suggestions on what we can do, should do, might do, want to do. Part of this work relates to a group called Partners for Sacred Spaces who will be consulting with members of the vestry and others about how best to use our space, increase our community connections, practice a new style of radical hospitality, and listen because such work is the spark of new life. My thanks to Walt, Barbara, Maggie, Joel, and others who have shown interest. While this will be a major benefit to writing the search profile, it also will help in answering the question: what our mission is, what are we called to do.

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When I arrived 5 months ago, I found two excellent Wardens and a Vestry committed to the best work it could do. Please join me in thanking our Vestry and especially Barbara and Becky our Wardens, and Maggie Hart our Treasurer. I have enjoyed working with them and they are truly a blessing.

I wish I could tell you that my first five-months have been a walk in the park, but that would not be true. I am not Dan, Barbara, Marty, or any other priest who has had the honor of serving here.

I want to thank the Vestry for the courage to welcome the Reverend Heather Barta to work with the vestry in sessions concerning conflict resolution and the care and feeding of a rector. The vestry received a great deal of helpful information about how parish structure is organized, and the unusual way that the vestry and rector work. Through no fault of their own, vestry members can get the idea that the vestry is like any other board that has sole control over everything to do with the church. That thinking is quite wrong, and yet the Episcopal Church is quite poor at teaching about its own structure.

The United States Government and the Episcopal Church government were built around the concept of balance of power on every level, no one person or group can do much. A Rector may attempt to be the Prince, or a vestry may try to be Board of Trustees. Neither of those things work, our structure does not work that way.

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I'd love to chat with those interested about the history and unique nature of our church after our services some Sunday, if anyone is interested...let me know. I am a teacher at heart.

St. Paul's has wonderful people that support you as our staff. Our newest staff member is Megan Faris our new Administrative Assistant. Megan is in the office on Tuesdays through Thursdays. Holly Richardson our Director of Music,

Matthew Benkert our Organist who is back after a brief recovery from Covid, Terrance Whitehead our amazing and dedicated Sexton who helps everyone and is raising two teenage boys, and George Gibson our amazing Director of Finance, finally Refael McDaniel the Director of our Gospel Choir. I am indebted to you all and thank you for your ministry among us.

Thank you for allowing this old priest who has lost as much memory as hair, the chance and honor of serving you, I am truly thankful. Marcie and I appreciate your welcome, your courtesy and hospitality and most of all your kindness. Over time, I pray I earn your trust enough to listen to advice even when it violates those seven last words and does indeed try something we've never done before.

Let us come together as the body of Christ. Let us lead through Peace and reconciliation. Let us learn to see change as part of learning.

Let us prepare for our new Rector so that they too will know and love this community as we do. Let us walk into 2022 and our 183<sup>rd</sup> year with courage and most of all with love.

Amen