

Vestry Voices

by Chris Porteus, St. Stephen's, Earleville
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The May meeting of the Vestry on May 17 (the 316th Anniversary of North Sassafras Parish), St. Stephen's Episcopal Church produced some good business and a leap forward in Purpose. The Purpose Statement has finally been completed and unanimously approved by the Vestry. This Statement should be learned by all members of St. Stephen's, and all that we do should flow through it to strengthen our commitment to mission and ministry to God in Christ Jesus.

The Purpose of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church is "to know Christ and to make Christ known through Worship, Education, Mission, and Fellowship, so that others are brought to Christ."

This is a very powerful statement and one that links the ministries we do best with the necessity to grow, "in bringing others to Christ."

Our "Worship" of God is both traditional and innovative, bringing deeper ways to know Christ and to worship the Trinity living among us. Considering there are 56 normal celebrations of the Eucharist or Morning Prayer, which include Sundays and Holy Week, 22 of those Sundays or Holy Week celebrations are innovative, experimental, and some do not have sermons. Our choir has taken on new responsibilities of late and is to be commended for knowing the liturgy better than ever before.

Our "Education" covers a lot of ground for a small parish. Adults have the opportunities of a Bible Class, Prayer Group, and a Healing Class and Liturgy, along with a five-week Lenten Program that numbers close to 20-24 each year – more than one quarter of the average Sunday attendance. This is a wide spread of offerings and is very good. The Youth Group with its questions, community service, deep spiritual foundation, trained leadership, concerned parents and inquisitive youth, helping around the church and participating in diocesan and provincial events, should make us all proud and grateful to Christ who supports us in this great adventure and endeavor. Elementary education continues through the writing and producing of its own curriculum, which has been the case for the last 14 years. Children and teachers do not forget what they learn in our Sunday school. Many helpful skits to lead off Bible stories have been performed in church so that the whole congregation is always aware what the children are studying. The Nursery is being planned for 2008-2009 with many adult volunteers.

Our "Mission" is in the line of our patron saint, St. Stephen, the finest ministry that he could ever imagine for a small church of his namesake. The amount of goodness and generosity of the members of this parish for others is astounding: from coat collections, to homeless shelter ministry, to mittens, and food drives, to school supplies, and helping needy local families, to soup for shut-ins, help for the bereaved – we care not only for others, but for our own who might fall between the cracks. The amount of people

involved in the congregation is staggering, not just in the actual ministry, but in donations, contributions, and prayer. Our Youth and Sunday school are also heavily involved in these efforts.

Our “Fellowship” has tried many ways of deepening friendships and spiritual friendships over the last several years through coffee hour, donation dinners, free dinners, All Hallows Eve and Mardi Gras celebrations, dinners to support our churchyard cemetery, and several concerts. We now have four musical artists we can actually call upon to help us for Mission work, and these people are Christina Harrison, internationally known recording artist and her Celtic music; William Ogden, who attends St. Stephen’s and has a program of sing-a-long music for piano; Dean Sapp, internationally known recording artist who with his band is hoping for a chance soon to play bluegrass music for all; and Murphyz Law, who are willing to play free to raise money for Mission. And, we are always looking for more to put us on the map, not for money, but for Mission and to learn with these musicians the depths of God in Christ’s love through this art form. There are other people who draw, take pictures, mold pots and the like who live right in our backyard. If you know any, speak with Chris.

All of these strengths reach out beyond ourselves and our church to welcome and invite others into our surroundings and into our lives. Yes, all of our strengths in this statement lead us to bring others to Christ, here at St. Stephen’s. Our aim through our strengths is to help others find the blessings of life, the comfort in times of pain, the healings of God in Christ, the wonderful love and happiness that comes to those who seek God. As Hymn 711 of the Hymnal says, “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.” Those things are peace, joy, strength, comfort, grace, giftedness, gladness, harmony, happiness, freedom, fairness, and love, among other wonderful gifts that God in Christ blesses us with when we do what He asks.

And in a fascinating way, it all happens without gobs of money. It all happens because of the generosity of people, living and loving to glorify God. A bit of money helps, but we are able to do this through people connections, hard work, belief and faith. Our security is in Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit guides around any shortfall. Thank you, God, for the gifts that you have given us and help us use our money to bring others to Christ, and do what he commands, and may your peace always be with us.