



For our Annual Meeting message, I want to focus on Ephesians 2: 19-20 which is the text for the anthem the choir will sing.

You are no longer strangers; rather, you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together; growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together for a dwelling place for God.

As we consider 2017, I give thanks again to our Wednesday Bible Study group and others of you who have been willing to engage in conversation about how you see St. John's, strengths and areas of challenge. It is good to remember the positives as we also need to be honest and straightforward about our challenges. We are where we are and if we will, we are going forward into an even stronger commitment to God and our community.

“Too often, a church is often known by what it is against rather than what it is for. We fail to create common ground.¹ When it comes to the church we have to understand that, for many, the church has become a dividing line. Partnering with the community creates a common ground for people that can start a new conversation, remove that stigma and show off the gospel.”

In 2017, we partnered with the community in many ways working to create common ground. Among them were:

- Ecumenical efforts, especially with Christ Lutheran and First Christian.
- Ash Wednesday
- Maundy Thursday
- Good Friday
- Lenten Soup Supper
- Fall Tuesday Night Reformation Study
- Beer & Brats Celebration
- Mardi Gras Celebration
- Blessing of the Animals, held at the Animal Welfare League building

¹ <https://careynieuwhof.com/episode174/> [Jeff Henderson](January 24, 2018)

Other ways in which we are active in our community includes our continuing involvement with Wabash College in ways small and larger. We invited incoming Wabash students to eat with us- and we had about 70 students, faculty and St. John'ers for an evening during the summer. Thank you to all who participated at the relatively last minute in setting this up and making it another of the ways in which we reached out to our community to show off the gospel of hospitality and learning and worship.

We offered great education on Sunday mornings, primarily lay led and with some outstanding outside speakers. Thanks to the Adult Education Committee who gathered up many of us to facilitate conversations on a variety of topics that deepened our knowledge and perhaps, sometimes, our faith. Keep those ideas coming for what you would like to hear and learn about. I believe the spring 2018 sessions have and will continue our desire to be lifelong learners.

And, our 2017 educational opportunities didn't stop there. Our regular offerings included Education for Ministry (or EFM) on Sunday afternoons, Bible Study on Wednesday afternoons and other more focused/shorter programs.

The Outreach Committee has been busy making sure the community knows that we are here and we care. A reminder of this was a couple of years ago when Outreach asked you to write on our bulletin board the names of the organizations in which you are involved in our communities. We gathered more the names of more than 70 organizations- that's living the gospel through your daily life. And, I bet, it's more than 70 now as I talk with you and learn about the many ways you truly live into this community.

Outreach has also sponsored fun evenings such as Mardi Gras and Beer & Brats. We offered food and fun as well as raising money that St. John's matched to go to a worthy cause such as Half Way Home, a residential program for women recently out of prison who are working to get back into society. We have given money to several other organizations as you saw in reading the Annual Report. God has gifted us with much and we gift back into the community in response.

Our children are a large part of who we are. They reflect our belief that God cares for everyone regardless of age or gender. They bring light to us when they sing or present a play. They show their care for others by gathering funds during Lent to be given to the community and then in response to the hurricanes. Encouraging the next generation in what it means to be a child of God and what it means to care for one another, respecting the dignity of all. The foundations that all of those who lead Sunday School is critical. St. John's exists to pass along our love of God and love of neighbor.

We are also known in the community for our worship and other liturgical offerings. Our Centering Prayer group includes those who attend St. John's on Sunday mornings and those who do not. If you crave a time to be quiet with God and also a time of Scripture reading and conversation, give it a try on Wednesday mornings at 7:30a.

And, in some ways it is a sadness and in others it is exactly right: we are known for the funerals held here. Nearly every time we have a funeral, someone who doesn't worship here will tell someone who does how wonderful the service was. I don't think that is an empty compliment. Rather, I think it speaks to the Episcopal style of worship as one of grace and hope. One of dignity and one that for many reaches deep into their souls with comfort. As Episcopalians, we offer a middle way. We offer a worship style that is liturgical and yet flexible. No, we don't very often sing "contemporary music" but we do sing the Creed in Advent and during the summer. We offer prayers for ourselves and our community each Sunday and at other times we gather. Someone at St. John's is always praying- the centerpiece of our relationship with God and a response to St. Paul that we pray always. We recognize that we are not perfect and we confess our sins, known and unknown in our desire to be in right relationship with God. And, I hope, when we have visitors, someone offers a helping hand to guide the visitors through a sometimes confusing Book of Common Prayer! We worship in a time-honored fashion that allows space for each person to find God in his or her own way. And, we offer Communion each week to give us strength for the days ahead and uniting us in the belief that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

2017 was also noted for building challenges. While our challenges were not with the literal foundation of this place, we continued to have plumbing challenges- this time downstairs so we didn't have to replace ceilings, thank goodness, as happened a couple of years back. This is simply part and parcel of being in a physical building. While St. Paul, in writing to the Ephesians, undoubtedly did not mean his reference to a building to be a literal building, in our day and time, we do need to consider our physical plant when evaluating our year. On the very positive side, we were able to restore our stained glass windows – they are so much brighter and enhance our worship space well beyond the money it cost.

We need to celebrate all that we do well as a faith community. We continue since 1837 to lay a good foundation of looking outward into our community while also finding inward a place of refuge and solace and a place of strength and courage defined by our faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. We also need to celebrate the extraordinary financial generosity that makes St. John's and all we do and are possible. We will talk a bit more about this when we move into Whitlock Hall.

As we face into 2018, we do have challenges. The world continues to change around us and we cannot ignore those changes. And, changes are often for good if they help us continue to grow although sometimes the changes can be painful when it means we must let something familiar go. An overarching challenge is to help the world see, to help each of us see, how St. John's and our Christian faith is relevant. Why faith matters. Why a community of faith can be so important, especially in times of sadness and loss. We are more than a social club, even more than a social club with a cross. We need to get that message out one person at a time. We don't need to stand on a street corner thumping our Bible, although for some that can be a valid ministry. We need to remember the words of St. Francis: Preach the Gospel at all times; use words if necessary. My prayer is that being at St. John's helps give you the strength and courage to live a life that witnesses to the love of God for you and for us. To pray without ceasing, whether silently or aloud. To pray for healing and in thanksgiving. To know what it means to be centered in Christ,

day by day by day. And, in the words of a song from my younger life: that they will know we are Christians by our love.

An example of change in our world continues to be the use of social media, such as but not limited to, Facebook. We have a Facebook page and I try to post something each week but would sure appreciate others joining in. We need to **“use social media as an opportunity to recognize the good happening around St. John’s”** (Id). The change for 2018 that I’d like to see is that our posts more often promote what is going on in the community outside of our doors. Researchers tell us that “one way to get more people interested in coming to your church is to stop talking so much about how great it is. Instead, use social media as an opportunity to recognize great things you see going on around your city. Adding value to your community in turn adds value to our mission.” We tend to do some of this in our bulletin and during announcement time, but what it look like for us to help promote, more frequently, community events that support all the wonderful things going on in Crawfordsville and Montgomery County? Worth considering and if you have an interest in helping this happen, please see me.

A second area of challenge, although not yet defined clearly, is what to do with the Wheat House when the Youth Service Bureau (“YSB”) secures a location that is better suited to the many ministries it offers to our community. For several years, we have rented the Wheat House to the YSB for \$1/per year. They then pay all maintenance and other upkeep. The building no longer really meets their needs for office space and it offers no programming space. Therefore, if the YSB receives the grant they have applied for, they will be leaving the Wheat House. This may come in 2018 so it is not too soon to begin conversation about the future of the Wheat House. Several years back we held “BHAGs” – or conversations around Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals. In every session, the issue of the future of the Wheat House was raised.

When we have particulars about the YSB’s plans, we will convene some parish-wide meetings to reconsider this topic. We will also need to do some background leg work so we can present you with facts about some options. Again, at this point, no specific dates but something we will be needing to discuss and decide and probably in 2018.

To reiterate from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians:

You are no longer strangers; rather, you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together; growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together for a dwelling place for God.

For 2018 let us live into this text as we live into our faith. Continue at St. John’s to grow into a holy temple in the Lord in all of your life. We are, as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says: The Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement. May 2018 be a year where our branch continues to grow and flourish. May 2018 be a year where St. John’s offers you strength and solace as you go and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**