

## **Sermon given on Sunday of Annual Meeting 2012**

**November 11, 2012**

**By Roy G. Pollina+**

I served my first year as an ordained minister as a Deacon at Trinity Church in New Orleans. I was blessed to spend that important year of training under the guidance of the Rev. Hill Riddle who had recently moved from Christ Church in Roanoke to become Rector at Trinity Church.

On Trinity Sunday Fr. Riddle used his sermon time to talk about the state of the church and the vision for its future, Trinity Sunday being the patronal feast for Trinity Church. I continued this practice when I became Rector at St. Michaels Episcopal Church. On our Patronal feast, the Sunday closest to September 29<sup>th</sup> the Feast of Michael and all Angels, I would speak about the current state of that church and a vision for its future. Here at Christ Church, you can look at it two ways: either there is no patronal feast for Christ or ever Sunday is Christ's Feast Day. I have chosen to use the Sunday of the Annual Meeting to speak about the state of Christ Church and a vision for its future.

Let me begin by saying that I am very pleased with the progress made so far. Just to remind you where we were a year ago, let me quote from the sermon I gave last year on the Sunday of our Annual Meeting. I said, "In my first month here I lead a mini Vestry Retreat. I asked the Vestry their favorite memories of Christ Episcopal Church. Ministry was mentioned, for sure, but most of the replies mentioned good food, good fun, and good fellowship. I have been here two months and the number of fellowship events on Christ Church calendar are zero. The number of fellowship events coming up is zero. No ice cream socials, no covered dish suppers, no progressive dinners, no Sunday breakfasts, no foyers groups, no dances and no need to go on. We just do not play together enough. I am not saying that we are under recreated; I know that you like to get together with your friends to golf and play bridge and to go to book and garden club. I am saying that like any family, the church family needs to play together and needs to eat together. In many Episcopal Churches the chief motivator for fellowship is the Episcopal Church women. For many reasons this church needs an ECW. The time is right to resurrect the ECW at Christ Episcopal Church. As Rector I am permitted to be an ex-officio member of the Episcopal Church women, but that is not going to work for the rest of the males in the congregation. I think a regular meeting for the men of the church, a time when we can burn a steak, drink a glass of wine, and listen to a speaker talk about subjects of interest. With the members that we have and their connections, we should be able to get some great speakers. "

That is what I said, a year ago and I feel that last year's sermon was well received. I remember that at one of

the services, I can't remember if it was the early or the late services, but at one of the services when I reached the part about resurrecting the ECW a female voice in the congregation shouted "Hallelujah!" Right after that sermon, a tall, thin, blonde woman came up to me as I was greeting people at the door. Excitedly she told me that she felt inspired by my sermon to take charge of the Parish Life Committee. I, of course, was delighted. The only problem was that on Monday morning when I got to the office I realized I had not a clue who that woman was! It turned out to be Debbie Lewis. I am happy to say we have an ECW, we have a Parish Life Committee, and we have a Men's Club. (Did I happen to mention that the men had roasted Lamb last month at our meeting?)

The calendar has regularly scheduled events that bring us together to celebrate the fellowship we have in Jesus Christ. We are the body of Christ and a healthy body is made of healthy, active parts. I am happy to say Christ Church is in good shape to look at new challenges. Let me suggest that one of the challenges I would like this congregation to engage is found in the Treasurer's Report that you saw at the Annual Meeting. Before you get a head of me, this is not a money challenge; it is a people challenge reflected in our financial statements.

I will tell you what you already know – we do not take attendance at Christ Church on Sunday. Actually during my sabbatical I went to Lutheran church and during the offertory they passed a clip board with an attendance sheet for everyone to write their name. Although we do not take attendance, we do have a limited ability to know who is in church on Sunday because we record member contributions against pledges week by week. Sadly, not every member family turns in a signed pledge card. Last year 28% of Christ Episcopal Church did not turn in a pledge card. While 72% did turn in a pledge, which is pretty good, 28% did not, which is sad. Beginning this year, 2012, with the Vestry's approval I asked that the 28% who did not turn in a pledge card have recorded a \$1 annual pledge for them. This did several things: The first is that, until this year, only the pledging and contributing members received a quarterly statement of giving verses pledge. Now, all member giving units get a quarterly statement. If you did not pledge or did not give, we remind you four times a year. We remind you that the widow's mite, two copper coins a week, have been pledged on your behalf. The second advantage to having a recorded pledge for all members is that we can now track all members, somewhat, on attendance. The third advantage, maybe the biggest advantage, is that non-pledge money no longer gets mingled with the loose offering.

When you look at our financial information you will see that we use the categories that churches have used for generations: pledge and plate, sometimes called loose offering. More accurately, since all members have a pledge, now pledge means "member" and anything recorded as plate or loose offering means "visitor". Which brings me to the people challenge found in the Treasurer's report, our plate offering is substantially down. Low plate offering means low visitor attendance. The challenge for 2013 for Christ Episcopal Church is to increase the plate offering. Here is the trick; the only ones who can do that are non-members. We have to get and keep visitors. We have to make the visitors feel welcomed. I know I have said this before but it is worth repeating: there is a difference between a friendly church and a welcoming church. A visitor coming into a new church may see people gathered in groups, talking and laughing together, and what they see is a friendly church. But the visitor who is invited to join in the conversation and laughter has experienced a welcoming church. All welcoming churches are friendly but, not all friendly churches are welcoming.

The goal for 2013 is to be a welcoming church. The key to being a welcoming church is inviting a person into the life of the church. In this we have made a good start. Some people find it difficult to invite their friends to worship service on Sunday. For those people, the church has alternative programs that should be an easy invite. It should be easy to invite a friend to an ECW social, Men's Club dinner or Parish Life soirée. It may be that your friend is looking for a church and might be moved by the Holy Spirit to attend our services.

I am pleased to say that our Sunday worship offering is exceptionally good. We have the quiet, profundity of Rite I at 8 am and the uplifting nature of our Choral Presentation of Rite II at 10:30 am. We do Episcopal worship very well so it is difficult to understand why our attendance is so low. One answer has to do with the busy lives of our membership, many of whom are not in town on Sunday morning. Another answer has to do with the changing demographics of worshippers; something we ignore at our own risk. Like it or not, the contemporary spiritual seeker is often looking for a worship experience that engages them where they live and more and more, especially with the younger

generations where they live is in a multi-media digitized world. Those who came to the contemporary worship service with Fran McKendree know that good Episcopal worship can be done as a multi-media experience with good contemporary music.

Beginning with the New Year it is my intention to add a contemporary service at least once a month to our worship offerings. The additional service will be scheduled in the early evening or late afternoon on a Sunday. The benefit will be two-fold: A contemporary worship service that we hope will attract this demographic we are missing now; and we will offer a service at a time our members who miss Sunday morning can attend. It is my hope that a third service will make Christ Episcopal Church more welcoming.

Finally, we have to do something to make our Sunday morning services, especially the 10:30 am service, more welcoming. We have to find a way for the visitor and the new member to be welcomed into our group of friendly people on Sunday morning. Many or most Episcopal Churches have a coffee hour after each service. A few serve a breakfast after services and the congregation gathers to fellowship and to invite the visitor into their fellowship. I have not settled on a definite plan but we must do something: maybe every week we can have a coffee or something more elaborate maybe once a month we can have a breakfast or once a quarter.

I guess we will wait and pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us, because I am still not sure what that looks like. I would like to hear from you. Waiting for the Holy Spirit to guide us is the message of today's Psalm: "Unless the Lord builds the house, their labor is in vain who build it"? This is the Lord's house we are the Lord's stewards. I look forward to working with you and with the New Vestry in this coming year.  
Amen.