

Rector's Annual Address
The Rev. Andria Skornik
January 29, 2023

Today we hold our Annual Meeting. So instead of the usual sermon I will offer my Annual Address, which is going to be a read on where we're at and encouragement for what comes next. But before talking about our parish, I want to pan out a little and talk about the state of the church in the United States.

For years we've heard about the decline of church attendance and religious affiliation. But as data comes out about how all of this has been accelerated by the pandemic, the results are sobering.

You may have seen recent articles on this in The Atlantic or NPR. One said it's estimated that 30% of congregations are not likely to survive the next 20 years. Another that American Christianity is in the midst of an identity crisis, noting the decline in attendance especially among millennials and Gen Z who say traditional church doesn't speak to their realities. Christian affiliation is also down by over 10% just in the last 10 years. And one article said that while once-booming evangelical churches are worried about declining numbers, liberal mainline protestants like the Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians are hemorrhaging members. (Don't worry, it'll be more upbeat by the end.)

The pandemic may have sped things up. But none of this should surprise us. We've been hearing this for the last 20 years at least. But we do need to pay attention and be open to what all of this has to teach us.

In light of all this, it's helpful to look at times in church history when the opposite was true. Not because people were being coerced into participation by the state. Or manipulated into it by fear of hell or whatever else. But when people were drawn out of a true longing.

In Acts 2 it talks about such a time when the church was growing rapidly. This was just after Jesus' death and the miracle of Pentecost. Out of sheer interest and need they were gathering and meeting in homes. And it says daily new people were added to their numbers.

But why? Why did the early church do so well? What made it take off so quickly?

Of the many possible answers, one that is essential but gets overlooked is that the early church was a *Commons*. It says it right there in Acts 2. That those who committed themselves to this way of life held what they had in common so that none had need. And — in what is a delightful added detail — it says that when they gathered together their hearts were glad.

They came together. They offered what they had. They received what they needed. And something miraculous happened. People were happy. No one was in need.

In the gospels, we find another story like this. It's the only miracle besides the resurrection that's recorded in all 4 gospels. And it happened when Jesus was teaching the crowds. Teaching them the good counterintuitive, revolutionary stuff that we heard in today's reading from Micah and the Sermon on the Mount.

It was getting late in the day. But no one wanted to leave because what he was saying was so good. But people were getting hungry.

The way it's told in John, the disciples are kind of freaking out, because Jesus asks them how they are gonna feed all these people. Philip says, are you kidding? It would take more than a year's wages to buy enough bread so that everyone could get just one bite. But then a boy comes forward and offers his 5 loaves and 2 fish. This was a totally irrational solution. A basket lunch in the face of thousands of people.

Jesus blesses what he gives. Divides it among baskets that are then passed around so that everyone gets to have as much as they want. When they gather up the leftovers and there are 12 baskets full.

Now was it that the bread and loaves actually multiplied? Or that as the baskets were going around some people were inspired by the boy and put what they had in and took what they needed? We don't know. But either way what happened was a miracle.

And it happened because someone stepped forward and offered what they had up to whole. Held it in common. And like in the early church, when that happened, none had need. In fact, there was more than enough.

Now, in the cases of the mind boggling success of the early church, or the feeding of the 5,000, we could say these were singular events that happened back then. And yet, I don't think it's exaggerating to say that we see miracles like that happen everyday at All Saints.

A need comes up in one of our outreach programs and often that day or soon after a call comes in with someone who randomly has that very thing to donate. Or like before Christmas, we didn't have enough people to cover the holiday shifts in our outreach ministries. So we put the call out to Bee and something like 50 people from outside All Saints called in to help. So many people that Kristen, our Outreach Coordinator, could hardly keep up with the tremendous response.

Or like how at the end of this year — into December even, we had a gap in our budget that we didn't think would fill — \$22,000 to be exact. When Jerry ran the numbers in early January, we had \$22,000 in unanticipated income that filled the deficit.

As we've stepped out in faith together, membership has continued to grow. Giving has continued to grow. We exceeded our 2023 pledge goal and raised an additional almost \$12,000 for the Woodstock Pantry Expansion in the last 2 months and brought in over \$30,000 in grants for this project.

We have continued to grow in nontraditional ways as well. We're giving out more food, on an average of 12,000 pounds each month. 14,000 people are served each year in Pantry. 100 hot meals are served every Saturday. Between 30 to 50 a week people hygiene and showers and clothes. And 82% of our Outreach volunteers are coming from the wider community. We've also grown in the number of lives saved through blood drives. Or in people coming into our space and being touched through community programs like AA, Tai Chi, and Capoeira.

What is allowing our ministry to grow and spread and touch thousands of people each year?

It's because you stepped forward and offered what you had. And offered it as something to be held in common, not only with fellow parishioners, but the wider community.

It's what you articulated in the parish profile drafted 5 years ago, the one that drew me to All Saints, when you said you wanted to be more integrated with the neighborhood as a vital part of it.

It was what you showed in the pandemic when you increased outreach efforts in the pandemic and found a way to continue them after.

It's what Revive — the group who formed Tabor Space — heard in their discussion with our Vestry when you talked about how you wanted this to be a place that people can gather around food, art, music and conversations that matter. They said it sounded like what we were describing was a "Woodstock Commons" and the name stuck, and that has been the umbrella name for what we call this sense of call.

And it's worth noting that this is not something that started in the last five years. If you've sat in on the newcomers presentation and heard Deb Miller's quick history of All Saints, you know that this goes back to our very beginning. Our very first church on this property about 100 years ago was floated down the river that parishioners hauled up to 41st St. The bell we ring every Sunday was the old Woodstock school bell, gifted to us decades ago. Our parish was used as an army barracks during world war 2 while soldiers went to Reed. Sometimes our hall has been used as a

roller skating rink or a dance floor. And the Mustard Seed Thrift Store and Hot Meals have now had almost 50 years of ministry.

We have been a collaborative, community-sourced effort since our very beginnings.

And what we have seen is when we step forward, offer what we have and hold it in common is that the needs around us are being met. Our needs are being met. There is not just enough — there is more than enough! And there is a sense of gladness that comes with being part of it.

Great preacher and author Frederick Buechner once said: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

We can ask where is the hunger? What is ours to give? Interestingly, as both the Atlantic and NPR articles show, the churches and faith communities that are stepping out to meet the needs of the wider community — not trying to make people fit into their version of what church looks like — but meeting people where they are at... they are not dying or declining. They are becoming places of life.

One article talks about a church that meets around a campfire and then people garden together. Another church opens its sanctuary for yoga, called Breathing Under Stained Glass.

One author says, “...the old metrics of success—attendance and affiliation, or, more colloquially, ‘butts, budgets, and buildings’— may no longer capture the state of American religion. [but] Although participation in traditional religious settings is in decline, signs of life are popping up elsewhere: in conversations with chaplains, in online communities, in social-justice groups rooted in shared faith.”

Another talks about the timing, saying, “we are more lonely, more divided, less hopeful, and less trusting than in previous decades. Noting “this swell of spiritual creativity comes at a time when Americans seem to need it most.”

In this time where people are more isolated than ever before; where loneliness is becoming a leading health risk; where economic needs are pushing more people to the edge and where churches have some soul searching to do, my encouragement is this: Keep stepping forward to offer up what you have. Keep stepping forward, even if it seems small in comparison to great need. Keep stepping out, even if it looks different than what we’ve done in the past. And be assured that this doesn’t diminish who we are as a Christian community. It’s one of the most Christlike things we can do.

Keep welcoming people, and loving them, and give them a place of belonging, and a place to do some good in the world, whether they become part of the worshiping community or not. Let them know we're just glad you're here. And trust that Christ is bringing us together — making us one — beyond our understanding

As we step forward with what we have in response to the needs we see around us. Our loaves and fish. Our building, our skills and time, our resources — whatever it is. We will find life. We'll find that there is more than enough. We will find our deep gladness.

Amen.

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<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/july/mainline-protestant-evangelical-decline-survey-us-nones.html>