

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
10:00 a.m. Celebration of the Holy Eucharist
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – January 31, 2016

“Annual Report to the Parish”

Scripture: I Corinthians 13

Good morning, people of St. Stephen's Church, to our members and friends, to newcomers in this community and those who may be visiting on this day. Welcome! It is my first opportunity as your rector to address you on the Sunday of our Annual Meeting, and I am grateful for that opportunity.

On the 24th of April 2015, a minivan whisked to the curb at the Minneapolis / St. Paul Airport, the side door slid open, and our welcome to this community began... immediately. On our first ride into Edina, we learned everything about Mary Tomback and Karol Saunders. Well, everything we needed to know. They couldn't stop sharing with Britton and me their love and appreciation for St. Stephen's Church. We heard about it between summaries of their life stories, reviews of the Mall of America, information about their kids, a quick primer on the local weather, the history of Southdale Mall, “the first fully enclosed climate controlled shopping mall in the United States”... and did I mention their love and appreciation for St. Stephen's Church? It was palpable. It was overflowing and sincere. Not just some advertisement to the visiting job candidate, rather an affirming experience of life and

faith and hope. Before Britton and I made it to the hotel, we knew we could be with you, if it was God's will and your intention.

It is hard to believe sometimes that I have served as rector with you now only seven months. So much has occurred during this time of New Beginnings. As one member of the staff recently said to me: "Everything has changed... 100%!" For the better. On my first day in service as rector, church volunteers, members of the Youth Community, and staff distributed over 1,000 hotdogs to the hungry citizens of St. Stephen's Church and Edina during 4th of July celebrations on the front lawn. Put that beside the fact that we served Holy Communion to over 1,000 worshipping members and friends of this faith community a month ago on Christmas Eve, and I have to say, I am one delighted and humbled priest.

Our purpose today in Annual Meeting is both to carry out the business of the life of a faith community, but also to celebrate the gifts that God gives us in one another and in the world around us. Yes, this *business* meeting is also a celebration of our blessings, like:

- A thriving Senior Ministry that builds community amongst St. Stephen's older members, but that also reaches out to encourage Community Unity for all our members, young and old.

- A lively Wednesday evening intergenerational community that comes together around a shared meal, singing and praying together, hearing engaging speakers, or learning new things about faith. Welcome on Wednesdays, or WOW!, as we like to call it, has seen excellent attendance with 60 to 80 people on a regular basis, and nearer 100 people on occasion.
- The Wednesday Morning Bible Study that has sustained attendance at 25 to 30 persons since we began anew last fall.
- The Bash after Dark that raised around \$40,000 in a single evening to be used solely to support the needs of others. And while the Bash happens in a single night, I am completely aware that it takes a lot of days and nights to make it happen. Well done!
- St. Stephen's Befrienders are consistently engaged in visiting members of the parish who are in need of care and attention in times of change, grief, illness... anytime when a friendly and supportive presence is needed.

- TEC, Teens Encounter Christ, welcomed a Spiritual Director from the clergy of St. Stephen's Church this year, namely me. Looking forward to the next opportunity.

Throughout today's meeting, and over time, I know I will share with you more of my sense of the ministries of this active community of faith. The number of faithful and active ministries, bible studies, support groups, and fellowships is extraordinary.

But now let me turn for a moment to our future in ministry. The response of the community has been great in our recent request for annual pledges for the life and ministry of St. Stephen's Church. And because of the generosity of this congregation, I can share a couple of things that we can expect in the coming year:

First, many of you have shared your concern for the need for additional clergy to serve the pastoral and sacramental life of this large and vibrant faith community, and your recent responses through financial pledges are an indication of that concern. Because of the generosity of our members and friends, St. Stephen's Church is indeed in a position to seek and call an assisting priest in the current year. My intention is to continue to observe and listen for the needs of the parish as you express them to me, and to work with our bishop and parish leadership to identify qualified and inspiring

candidates for the position. Unlike your search for a rector, this process need not be so lengthy or elaborate, and my intention is to have a new priest on staff before midyear. I might mention here as well that I am working with the bishop to identify a deacon who will be assigned to service with St. Stephen's as well, likely in the spring.

Second, it is my desire to initiate with St. Stephen's Church the return of a Sunday evening service, what I have heard many of you call the 5-O' service, because it gathered at 5:00 in the evening. Again, thanks to your generosity, our parish budget will support this service, augmenting what current staff offers with any addition needs for music, clergy and supplies. The bottom line is that a Sunday evening service will open another door to participation in the Christian faith and life, and will likely serve the patterns of many of our members who are either engaged in other things on Sunday mornings, or who travel on the weekends to family gatherings elsewhere. A Sunday evening service will welcome those arriving back to town to come as they are for worship and fellowship, and it will provide us a worship venue to exercise contemporary creativity that can reach out to people who do not know or have a church.

I welcome you now, as we continue in worship, to reflect on the blessings you have known in this community of faith. There is more to learn in the Annual Meeting this morning, so I encourage your participation. Even if you were unable to RSVP,

come on across the street to the Edina Country Club and experience more of the celebration and learn more about our life together. We will look to get everyone in. A good thing to say about a church, don't you think?