

THE CHRONICLE

Grace and Saint Peter's Church
Baltimore's Traditional Anglo-Catholic Parish

August 2008

From the Rector

Dear Friends in Christ:

I hope that you all are enjoying your summer. I am enjoying my sabbatical, save for having a root canal in July. I hope that you will find Fr. John Alexander's article on Church growth helpful and food for thought. He is the Rector of St. Stephen's, Providence, Rhode Island. St. Stephen's is another sister Anglo-Catholic parish. Christians are called to testify to the Faith that they have received. It is something the whole body of the faithful are called upon to do. Our Mission statement reminds us that we are to share our Anglo-Catholic heritage with others. The whole Parish Family must work together to share the Good News of God in Christ Jesus.

This summer I go to Mass at Christ Church Cambridge at 8 AM and then on to breakfast with a group of parishioners. I find that the only thing that simply drives me crazy is the "peace". It lasts for an exceedingly long time. The people that I have met during this time are a delight and I am glad to be among them.

August is the month of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is a time to take to heart Jesus' call to us in the Word made flesh. "Let my soul like Mary, be thine earthly sanctuary." We are all called to perfection in Christ. We are also called to that place where Our Lady was assumed. That is, to be with Our Lord, her Son.

I pray that each of you will take to heart the idea of being a sanctuary for Our Lord and will endeavor to work at your own spiritual life.

I again thank Fr. Speer and Fr. Truiett, and Fr. McClean, for their work in my absence and indeed for those of you who have done extra things so that I can have a good sabbatical.

I remain faithfully yours,

Frederick S. Thomas

Keys to Parish Growth: Reclaiming Our Identity

by The Rev'd John Alexander, SSC
Rector, St Stephen's Church, Providence, R. I.

Parish churches today are caught in a double bind. On one hand, more and more parishes are finding it difficult to keep pace with rising costs. Many parishes that were able twenty-five years ago to support a Rector and Curate(s) must now make do with a Rector alone. Many parishes that were able twenty-five years ago to support a full-time Rector must now make do with a part-time Priest-in-Charge. Rising costs of insurance, utilities, repairs, salaries and benefits are straining church budgets everywhere. It is said that the only churches that can expect to be found open in another twenty-five years are those churches that start growing now.

On the other hand, church attendance and membership are declining across the board. As our society becomes more secular, fewer people are attending church. For this reason, achieving growth in attendance and membership is more of a challenge than ever. The churches that are growing are those that are succeeding in swimming against the tide.

The literature on church growth is extensive. But many of its strategies are shallow and superficial, pandering to the worst features of our consumerist culture. The more valid strategies instead emphasize building committed communities that attract newcomers by a clear sense of identity, purpose, and mission. Church growth experts maintain that the churches most likely to thrive and prosper in the coming hard years are those that emphasize their distinctiveness in relation to the secular culture and challenge their members to the highest possible levels of committed participation. Paradoxically, the growing churches will be those that make more rather than fewer demands upon their members.

In line with this approach, I want to suggest that our Anglo-Catholic identity and tradition should not be seen as an obstacle to growth but rather as our most powerful resource. Parish growth is of two kinds: outward and inward. Outward growth – i.e., growth in numerical attendance and membership – follows upon inward growth – i.e., growth in the faith, commitment, and spirituality of the parish community.

We can grow, then, by reclaiming the essential practices and disciplines of our parish's Anglo-Catholic heritage. And in this article, I want to propose eight steps that we can all take towards this end.

1. Sunday Mass Attendance

The first step is to maximize the Sunday mass attendance of our existing congregation. Consistent Sunday Mass attendance will boost parish growth. Visitors and newcomers are attracted to churches whose pews are more full than empty on a Sunday morning. Newcomers are likely to keep coming back to a church where existing parishioners are deeply committed to the practice of their faith – and the single most revealing external indicator of such commitment is consistent Sunday attendance. Newcomers are likely to keep coming back to a church where they can count on seeing the same people Sunday after Sunday, so that relationships can form and friendships can develop.

2. Daily Mass attendance

Mass has been celebrated daily here at St Stephen's since December of 1886. For most of our history, a key component of our mission and outreach to the local community and wider world has been opening our doors every day for worship. Many visitors and newcomers show up for the first time not on a Sunday but on a weekday. The more parishioners there are at a daily Low Mass, the more likely such weekday visitors are to gain a first impression of a vibrant parish community and to want to come back.

3. Daily Prayer

An old saying has it that no-one has the right to criticize the sermon who has not first prayed for the preacher. By the same principle, no-one has the right to bemoan a parish's failure to grow who is not regularly praying for that parish. Prayer really does make a difference. It is unlikely that God will send us new members if we neglect to ask him for them. Moreover, visitors and newcomers intuitively sense the depth of a community's spirituality, and are attracted to a praying parish.

4. Special Services

A key component of our mission and outreach at St Stephen's is the offering of choral services such as Solemn Evensong and Benediction, Advent Lessons and Carols and Solemn High Mass at times other than Sunday mornings. These occasional services attract significant numbers of visitors and guests. They thus constitute a prime opportunity to welcome and befriend visitors to St Stephen's. It follows that one sure method of contributing to parish growth is to attend as many of these evening services as possible and to make every effort to interact with visitors at the receptions following. It is difficult to imagine a more obvious opportunity for evangelism.

5. Fasting

As noted above, growing churches challenge their members of high levels of committed participation; and a key measure of such commitment in an Anglo-Catholic setting is adherence to the Church's discipline of fasting. The Church Year prescribes regular days and seasons of fasting, abstinence and self-denial. The ancient and universal custom of the Church bids us fast before receiving Holy Communion. Fasting is a powerful means of intercession. For example, we are bidden to fast and pray on the quarterly Ember Days for the mission and ministry of the Church. The more parishioners fast and pray regularly for the parish, the more we can expect great things to happen.

6. Confession

Another key measure of the spiritual health and vitality of an Anglo-Catholic parish is the number of confessions made by its parishioners. A congregation comprising many regular penitents is a congregation that is serious about the struggle against sin and the quest for holiness. In the history of St Stephen's, the times of greatest growth in attendance and membership have been the times of the greatest use of the confessional. In 1920, for example, the number of regular penitents had grown to the point that the weekly scheduled time for confessions had to be extended to three hours! As noted above, reclaiming our Anglo-Catholic identity is indispensable to our future growth. And the confessional is an indispensable component of our Anglo-Catholic identity.

7. Stewardship

Growing parishes are generous parishes. One obvious reason is that the more parishioners give, the better the parish is able to take care of its buildings and facilities. Buildings and grounds in a state of disrepair project the image of a church in decline; and such an image tends to repel newcomers. By contrast, well-kept facilities project the image of a congregation that loves and cares for its church; and such love and care is deeply attractive to newcomers. Moreover, generosity in Christian giving expresses a mature level of spiritual commitment. There is something deeply attractive about the joyful and enthusiastic spirit of Christians who are cheerful givers.

8. Mission

If we are truly practicing the disciplines that make us Anglo-Catholics – attending Mass, saying our prayers, keeping the fasts, confessing our sins, and giving generously – we can expect God to lead us to ever-deepening engagement in the Church's mission. Those seeking a church often say that they want a community where they can make a difference

by becoming involved in ministries of service to the community and the world. By engaging in mission, an Anglo-Catholic parish demonstrates the authenticity of its faith by living the truth proclaimed in its liturgy. A growing parish is a parish reaching out in mission.

Conclusion

Given our wonderful liturgy and music, parishioners sometimes wonder why more people don't come to St Stephen's. Some suggest that we need more publicity: that we have a great product, but need to market it more effectively. The fact is, however, that we are already doing everything we reasonably can to publicize our services, events and programs. In this article, I have suggested that the real challenge before us is not so much to market our liturgy as to live it. There is no better advertisement than a congregation seriously practicing the faith that its liturgy proclaims. And the eight steps outlined above represent how Anglo-Catholics put their faith into practice.

These steps need not wait for the initiation of any formal programs by Rector, Wardens or Vestry. Parishioners can begin to undertake them now, on their own initiative. When the majority of parishioners put these eight steps into action, the results will be dramatic. We shall grow in our sense of identity and purpose – in our faith, commitment, and spiritual maturity – and growth in our attendance and membership will surely follow.

Daily Mass Schedule

Sunday - 7:45 a.m. Matins and Low Mass 10:00 a.m. High Mass

Monday - 6:00 p.m. Low Mass

Tuesday - 12:00 Noon Low Mass and Holy Unction

Wednesday - 6:00 p.m. Low Mass

Thursday - 6:00 p.m. Low Mass

Friday - 6:00 p.m. Low Mass

Saturday - 12:00 Noon Low Mass

August 2008

August is the Month of the Assumption

1 ST PETER'S CHAINS	Pope Benedict
2 St Alphonsus Liguori, BCD	John, our Bishop
3 PENTECOST XII	Our Parish Family
4 St Dominic, C	The Dominicans
5 Our Lady of the Snows	The sick
6 TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD	The Apostolic Faith
7 St Cajetan, C	Holiness of Life
8 Feria	Eugene, our Bishop
9 St John Vianney, Cure d' Ars, C	The Society of the Holy Cross
10 PENTECOST XIII	Our Parish Family
11 Feria	Amendment of life
12 St Clare, V	The Franciscan Center
13 Feria (Monthly Requiem)	The Faithful Departed
14 Vigil of the Assumption	Greater Marian Devotion
15 ASSUMPTION BVM	Love of the Blessed Mother
16 St Joachim, Father of the BVM, C (Octave)	Devotion to the Holy Family
17 PENTECOST XIV (Octave)	Our Parish Family
18 St Helena, QW (Octave)	The Order of the Holy Cross
19 St John Eudes, C (Octave)	The Joseph Richey House
20 St Bernard, CD (Octave)	Monastic vocations
21 St Jane Frances de Chantal, W (Octave)	The Church in France
22 Immaculate Heart of Mary	Devotion to the Mother of God
23 Vigil of St Bartholomew	The suffering
24 PENTECOST XV	Our Parish Family
25 ST BARTHOLOMEW, Ap. M	Grace & St Peter's School
26 Feria	The sick
27 Feria	The suffering
28 St Augustine, BCD	A lively Faith
29 Beheading of St John Baptist	The gift of Faith
30 St Rose of Lima, V	The Church in South America
31 PENTECOST XVI	Our Parish Family

From Father Speer

Dear Friends,

We continue in the A Lectionary, the Gospel texts at Mass that come from the Gospel according to Matthew. Now that we are half way through Matthew, it is a good time to review Matthew's message, technique, and his signature.

From the earliest times, the Church established Matthew as the first of the four Gospels. The genealogy with which it begins and the stories about John the Baptizer provide an excellent hinge from the Old Testament to the New. Matthew's theme is the Kingdom of Heaven. While Luke the gentile is comfortable with saying the Kingdom of God, Matthew the Jew prefers not use the holy name. While Mark's signature is the word "immediately" and a journalistic style, Luke's is a biographic style with the best stories in the New Testament, and John's is his signs, Matthew's signature is stories in groups of three and seven for the purpose of memorization. Matthew is a first century Palestinian rabbi who regards Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God and the promised messiah.

We have come to chapter 13 of the book, which is the central chapter. All the stories before this chapter lead to it, and all the stories after follow from it. We know this is the turning point because at verse 1 Jesus comes "out of the house" to speak only to those who will listen carefully. The allegory about the wheat and the weeds comes before verse 36 and the explanation, detail by detail, comes after verse 36. Chapters 1 through 12 in ascending order have partner chapters 14 through 28 in descending order. You will find a clear illustration of this by looking at the dreams at 2:12 and 27:19.

Thanks be to Heaven for the Gospel according to Matthew, perhaps the best teaching Gospel in the New Testament. I remember this doggerel from seminary, and it remains helpful:

Matthew gives us five discourses,
In threes and sevens he likes his sources.
He writes to tell what OT meant,
With an ecclesiastic bent.

Father Speer