

## 2023 State of the Parish Report

Last year I stood in this spot and described us as being in liminal time and space. We were no longer what we were, what we had been; and who we were becoming had not yet come into focus. The pandemic had changed us, and changed the Church, its place and roll in our culture and society; and it wasn't clear that those shifts and changes had settled into a "new normal." In the midst of those shifting sands, it wasn't apparent who we were called to be, how we should respond to the call of the Gospel in this new landscape.

As I stand here today I am not sure that we have arrived at that "new normal." I think that we will be seeing the impact of these last few years playing out before us for quite some time, and I don't think any of us can yet predict where and when all of the pieces will fall back into place. But I do think that we are beginning to see new patterns emerging. I think that we are at that point where we can start to adapt, to strategize about the future without the fear that we will have the rug pulled out from under us again tomorrow. I think we are ready to explore, with some confidence, who we are called to be and how to respond to the call of the Gospel. In fact, we have already begun that process.

Who are we called to be? What are we called to do? Let's just take a look at the last year.

Last year, in the depths of winter, a new group was forming here at St. Andrew's. With a grant that had been given in the waning months of 2022, the Flower Guild held a training event, bringing in a floral designer to teach the basics of flower arranging, and began a series of community building events. Leadership for this new group stepped up, a member of our community who owns a flower farm offered to donate flowers, and people signed up to drive to the farm and bring the flowers back to Madison. Members of the Flower Guild share photos of their arrangements with the rest of the group, often work in teams of two, and support one another in the work that they do. They have become a community, developing friendships as they work side by side here at St. Andrew's.

The Flower Guild and the Altar Guild, long an established community here among us, began to gather on a regular basis for beer and a burger, an opportunity to gather with no other reason than to get to know each other and to nurture and develop the friendship that they share. Burgers and beer. Hey Men's Group... are you listening?

This year we have also made real headway in resurrecting Coffee Hour. It has taken a while for us to return to the Parish Hall for conversation and fellowship on Sunday mornings. When we started to gather in person as the pandemic shifted, gatherings like coffee hour still felt like a risk. But we have more and more people coming downstairs after church on Sunday mornings, eager to pick up on last week's conversations or begin new ones with new people. Folks are signing up to provide the food for the feast and the guests are arriving, eager for the fellowship for which St. Andrew's is famous.

This year we brought back Foyers, groups of six or eight that gather in one another's homes for a meal and the opportunity to get to know each other in ways that aren't possible in the time and space available at coffee hour. Gathered around a table, sharing stories, discovering

commonalities, recognizing shared interests, values, and dreams... this is what has made Foyers such a valuable part of our common life, and why it feels so significant that it is once again a part of the fabric of our community.

Just this past month we hosted a Meet the Artists Night at St. Andrew's. Members of our own community, gifted and talented artists of all stripes, set up in the Parish Hall to share their passion with our community. We learned things about one another that night that we might never have expected, saw the gleam in people's eyes as they shared their art with folks who were genuinely delighted and amazed at their talents.

Art. Did I mention art? The gallery wall in the Parish Hall has long displayed the work of artists, both members of St. Andrew's and from the wider community, but this year we have added something new. Artists who display their work are invited to a reception, where folks from St. Andrew's and the wider community can come to hear about their artistic process, their journey as an artist, and the unique vision that makes their art their own. These receptions provide yet another opportunity for us to come to know one another more deeply and to find ourselves on a common path here at St. Andrew's.

Who are we? What are we called to do? St. Andrew's has long been known for the depth and strength of its community. People new to St. Andrew's, often tell me that as soon as they came through the doors they could tell that people here care about and like one another. In this new place and time, that kind of community is increasingly hard to find. The pandemic weakened our social skills, those muscles atrophied, and it seems harder to put ourselves out there, to find new friends, to try new places and activities than it used to. Increasing polarization around social and political issues in our country have made finding and building community even harder. In a time and place like this, the gift of community is sorely needed, and it is one in which we are investing time, energy and resources.

This is probably a good moment to point towards our new mission statement, a mission statement that this community crafted to both describe and shape who we are and what we do, a mission statement presented and adopted at the annual meeting one year ago:

*All are welcome: Nourished by God's love,  
we follow Christ's example of service to each other and our community.*

All are welcome: Nourished by God's love... We are working to live that out in this time and in this place by building and offering a community of deep connection and support, where people know that they are welcome, and safe.

What about the second half of that mission statement, "we follow Christ's example of service to each other and our community." Let's look at how we are living into that part of our mission.

This year the Vestry adopted a Liaison program, in which members of the Vestry serve the different ministry groups at St. Andrew's, working to facilitate their work and to keep all of us informed about the many moving parts of our community. The Vestry liaisons hope to make connections between ministries who are working in the same vineyard, helping us all to work

collaboratively and efficiently, and to lower the barriers to participation by documenting processes and procedures within the ministries themselves. Clearly marked points of entry, good descriptions of the ministries, their goals and activities; a “handbook” that means we aren’t constantly reinventing the wheel, benefit us all by allowing us to more freely offer our gifts and talents, finding vocation in our life together here and in the communities we serve.

One way that vocation plays out at St. Andrew’s is through our commitment to the community around us. This past year, through our Outreach InGatherings, St. Andrew’s has given over \$34,000 to ministries in the community. We have developed strong ties to The Grace Food Pantry and to OWNIT, and the majority of those funds went to support those ministries, but we also gave to the Social Work Department at West High School and Madison Roots this year.

And through the Clergy Discretionary Fund, members of this community gave over \$6,500 to support people in crisis, providing rental and utility assistance, assistance with medical bills, medications, and emergency auto repairs. Does that surprise you? Forty-one thousand dollars? It shouldn’t, because we gave that much last year too! In fact, we do that pretty much every year as, nourished by God’s love, we serve one another and our community.

Vocation, the exercise of gifts and talents for the good of the community takes place here at home too. This year the Vestry committed money from our cash reserves and from the memorial gifts fund to engage paid section leaders in the choir. We all know that having the funds to staff a position doesn’t guarantee candidates for that position, and it has proven more difficult than we had imagined to find the right people to support our choir as they support us in worship on Sunday mornings, but the investment of resources represents a recognition of the centrality of our music program to our identity in this place, and a commitment to support the work that our Music Director, Ken Stancer, and the members of our choir offer on our behalf.

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This fall we have taken steps to be sure that all members of our community are welcome and have the opportunity to be nourished by God’s love. Last week our nursery reopened. We have four wonderful UW students who are excited to be extending God’s love to the youngest members of our parish family on Sunday mornings.

In addition, an extremely generous gift by a former parishioner has allowed us to seek, and I am very pleased to be able to tell you, extend a job offer to a highly qualified and exciting candidate, for a part time Children, Youth, and Family Ministries Coordinator. They have accepted the offer and I will meet with them tomorrow morning to cross all of the Ts and dot all of the Is. Once the letter of agreement is inked, we will do the big reveal and introduce the newest member of the staff.

If we were hiring someone to manage the program as it now exists, we would have been searching for someone to fill a ten to fourteen hour a week job; a job that we have advertised several times with no applicants coming forward. But because of Janet Hyde's gift, we are able to invite someone to a twenty hour a week job, a much more attractive position, and one which will help us to explore new ways of gathering our children and youth, new ways of engaging their whole families, and new ways of sharing with them the richness of our faith and tradition, the treasure that we have in clay pots, the love of God, poured out for all.

You have heard me talk about this position, a twenty hour a week Children, Youth, and Family Ministries Coordinator as staffing for Mission and Growth. The position is designed for a program that we hope to grow into, not for who and what we are, but for what we hope to be and become. I think that concept, staffing for mission and growth, budgeting for mission and growth, are key to the State of the Parish in 2023.

In 2023 the pace of change, the level of disruption and slowed and eased, and some patterns are emerging. One of them is apparent every Sunday morning. Our Average Sunday attendance year to date in 2023, only differs from our year to date average Sunday attendance in 2022 by three people a Sunday. There is a pattern emerging.

In 2019 our average was 136. Last year it was 91, and this year it is likely to be in the 90s again.

We are smaller than we were, and it's natural, it's good for us to want to grow, to see the pews full on Sunday morning, to hear more children's voices in the pews, to find the parish hall filled with people at coffee hour. I think that we need to make the coming year one where we focus our attention and intention, our resources and our energy on Mission and Growth, but please note, that I put mission before growth, and that's a key sequence.

**Mission.** The catechism says that "The mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." We do that work by seeking and serving Christ in all person, loving our neighbor as ourselves; and by striving for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Doing this work requires that we be nourished by God's love; that we have a community of deep love and support that will help us find the way forward; that we have a place to which we can come home for comfort, solace, companionship, and training. Doing this work requires that we all do our part to keep this community strong, Spirit filled and alive; it requires that we live into another of our baptismal vows, to continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.

**Growth.** We want to grow. We want people to come and discover what we have found, to hear the life giving message of Jesus Christ, and the truth that we are all loved without reservation or demand; that nothing we can ever do will cause God to abandon us; that nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And we know that we are enriched, that the fabric of our community become more beautiful with every person who joins us.

We grow when we live into another of those promises we renew every time there is a baptism in this place, by proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

Why do we come to church on Sunday mornings? Why do we participate in Foyers? Why do we prepare flowers or clean and iron linens for the altar? Why do we come to choir rehearsal every Thursday night and then come back on Sunday morning to rehearse some more and then help lead the community in worship?

Why do we give to The Grace Food Pantry and OWNIT? Why do we write thank you notes to OWNIT Ambassadors and Christmas card to people who are incarcerated in our state?

We can engage in mission, we can work to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ, but we aren't going to grow if we don't tell people why we are doing it! I know that's a hard thing to do. It can be scary to tell someone that you are a part of a faith community and that your faith is an important aspect of who you are and what you are called to do. It can be hard to broach that topic with your own family, let alone your coworkers, friends, or people you encounter socially. But my friends, this is the time for us to staff, to budget, to commit to Mission and Growth.

What is the state of the parish, of St Andrew's Episcopal Church in November 2023?

We are poised, as you will hear a little later this morning, financially sound; staffed for mission and growth, ready to engage as we slowly emerge from the liminal time and space that was thrust upon us. We are committing our resources, our energy, to staffing and budgeting; and we are placing our hope, our faith, on our dedication to mission and growth, and living into our mission statement:

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