

St. Mary's-in-Tuxedo Episcopal Church

Rector's Report

January 17, 2021

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Without over-stating the obvious, 2020 was a year of immense challenges for us all in our personal, work, and community life. Churches everywhere, and especially here at St. Mary's, had to make difficult decisions, sometimes immediately. We had to quickly reinvent the wheel in many circumstances. Things that were part of our well-worn routines were quickly abandoned due to health concerns, and new ways of being the Church emerged. In some cases, we long to get back to the familiar things: singing hymns, receiving the Sacrament in both kinds at the altar, and coffee hour, just to name a few. One silver lining has been that in being forced to meet the challenges before us, new ideas emerged, and will likely remain with us, such as livestreaming our services. Despite the limitations on physical presence, St. Mary's services were able to be seen by a broader group of people than ever before from around our country and even other parts of the world.

Beginning in mid-March, a variety of new services were added to our online offering, including morning and evening prayer, compline, and stations of the cross and benediction during Lent. Pete and I even managed to pull off a two-man Great Vigil of Easter. Beginning in July, with the permission of the Bishop, we returned to limited in-person services: Sunday at 10:00 a.m. in the church, and Wednesday at 10:00 a.m., initially on the lawn of the rectory, until the weather changed and we moved to the St. Mark's altar in the church. We are committed to the highest level of safety possible, and continue to monitor the situation as the pandemic unfolds. It is for this reason that we continue to limit in-person worship to two services weekly, with limited altar guild functions. (Thank you, Wendy, for your valiant efforts over the past months!) Everything else remains online, and all daily operations are handled virtually, if possible. We couldn't have imagined it then, but our transition to the cloud-based Google for nonprofits a few years ago has been an incredibly helpful tool. Once we get the all-clear to resume all in-person activities, we will be looking to you to help with the reboot by becoming involved in the many ministries of our parish. A great deal of emphasis will need to be given to revitalizing our ministry to children and youth, and I will need your help.

By the numbers... There were 1,183 communions, 101 celebrations of the Holy Eucharist, 142 daily offices read, 2 marriages, 6 burials, and 3 baptisms.

Beginning in June, we were pleased to have our Director of Music, Sheldon, back at the organ console. Music plays a vital role in our worship, and I am grateful to him for his love and dedication to St. Mary's and to our talented musicians Aileen, Alex, and Bruce for their ministry among us. I speak for Sheldon when I say that we are both looking forward to rebuilding our music program better than ever.

From the very beginning of the pandemic, St. Mary's stepped up to meet the needs of our community by coordinating with representatives from each neighborhood in Tuxedo, as well as with all of the institutions and organizations to see that no one went without food or medicines. I am very proud of everyone for their part in this effort, as well as of our strong partnership with the Sloatsburg Food Pantry, whose work grew exponentially with the need. 2020 was the year to end all years on the outreach front, and Sue Heywood, our indomitable outreach chair, went above and beyond even her normal laudable service in serving Christ in the least and the last. We have been in almost daily communication, and as you can tell from her report, a great deal of good was done. Brava, Sue, and thank you to everyone who gave so generously.

Due to both the pandemic and financial considerations, several painful decisions had to be made. First, we had to close our preschool. It had been losing money for years, and with the new universal pre-k offered by the public school system, it was clear that the time had come to say goodbye to this ministry. We were able to pay our teachers through the end of their contract year in August, and Miss Ida, our former head of school, is now working in the preschool program at TPS.

Another difficult decision was made when it became clear that we were not going to experience anything like "normal" for many months to come, possibly well into 2021. I decided it was best to close down the office indefinitely and to eliminate the position of parish administrator. I am deeply grateful to Lisa Favia for her years of dedicated service to St. Mary's, and we wish her good health and all of life's blessings. Sometime in 2021, we hope to be able to reevaluate our administrative needs, which have changed with time and circumstances, and look at the possibility of a new hire in that department.

Even though there was much that could be accomplished online, there are still tasks that require a physical presence. I am grateful to Lili and our fantastic bookkeeper, Natalia, who together with me worked out a socially-distant rotation of administrative tasks such that everything gets done with only one of us in the office at a time. Thank you, team!

Another bit of silver lining is that we have found a new group of cleaners all in one family who have been keeping the church looking better than it has in a long time. Thank you, Maria and the clean-team!

I would also like to thank Greg Stevens for his many years of service here at St. Mary's. Greg recently retired from his volunteer role overseeing the churchyard. If this is of interest to you, please do let me know!

Despite the closing of the preschool and temporary cessation of office activities, we have nonetheless been working behind the scenes with an eye toward the future. I would like to thank the small group who met virtually to brainstorm how we will use our physical space in a post-covid world. The current office in the undercroft was deemed too tight and stuffy to allow for the distancing and air circulation that we need for people to feel safe. It was therefore proposed that the rector, vestry, and administration be moved to the front half of French House (the former preschool).

Over the summer and fall, our talented carpenter, Aivars and his helper, have been busy transforming the former front classroom into a bright, airy, and spacious place for us to do our day-to-day work. The back half of the building will remain configured as a classroom and be called "St. Mary's Family Room." It will serve as a multi-function space for Sunday school, youth events, and the like. We will also have the flexibility to use the Sommaripa Room much more than in the past. Once a few finishing touches are complete, we will be able to move into our new home, and I look forward to showing it to you in person.

So what will become of the current office space? That space will be reimagined as "The Emporium," a church shop filled with everything from throw-pillows to fine cookware and antiques, which have been donated to the church. We even have a mascot: Woodrow the Woodchuck! Many thanks to Lili for bringing this idea to life, and to our generous donors who have already stocked us to the gills, especially Sara and John Cassis who provided many wonderful items, as well as some beautiful

furniture for my new office. We envision the Emporium being open initially one day during the week, and on Sundays before and after the service.

In the not-too-distant future, we plan to embark upon a capital campaign that was temporarily derailed by the pandemic. But even before that, we will need to focus attention on certain critical areas in need of repair in both the church and the rectory, as outlined by a comprehensive existing conditions report compiled over the course of 2019-2020 by the architect Walter Sedovich. Additionally, in consultation with the Tuxedo Park Police Department, we are looking at ways to increase security on our campus.

As you can tell from my report so far, it takes the dedication of many to make a church like St. Mary's operate smoothly. The vestry of St. Mary's is absolutely integral to our mission. I rely heavily on their support and wisdom, and am grateful for the differing gifts and perspectives each member brings to the table. But, nothing lasts forever, and as of today we are saying adieu to two of our number, Junior Warden Billy Mincey and treasurer Frank Favia.

The Junior Warden traditionally oversees buildings and grounds, and with his architectural expertise, Billy has played a vital role in undertaking an exhaustive existing conditions report, as well as the renovation of French House. He may be stepping down from his official role as Junior Warden, but we will certainly be looking to him for his counsel as we undertake the preservation of St. Mary's.

Another vital role is that of the treasurer, which, with his accounting skills, Frank Favia has navigated with aplomb for nearly a decade. I could always count on Frank to quickly and accurately produce any figures I needed. He was also diligent in keeping the yearly budget up-to-date, making adjustments as needed throughout the year.

And so, Billy and Frank, on behalf of the vestry and congregation of St. Mary's I wish to express our deep and sincere gratitude for your ministry among us over the years. Thank you.

Stepping into these two roles, respectively, will be Dennis Trotter for Junior Warden and JoAnn Hanson for treasurer. I have every confidence in their skills, and look forward to working with them as we begin to emerge from the pandemic into a changed world.

Also joining the vestry today will be Barbara Anderson who served on the rector search committee, and who in better times sings in our choir, as well as George Robertson. Both Barb and George bring experience and talents that will strengthen our already diverse group. My thanks also go to JoAnn Hanson and Bill Steinmann. JoAnn will begin her first full term after fulfilling a one-year vacancy left by the election of Lili Neuhauser as Senior Warden last year. JoAnn is also very ably heading up the investments committee, which has been hard at work to improve the performance of our endowment funds. Bill will be starting his second full term on the vestry.

Of course I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the blessing I have in Lili Nauhauser as Senior Warden. Being a rector is not for the faint of heart, and so it is critical to have a strong partner by your side to help guide the ship through all kinds of seas. As of this meeting, she has completed her first year in this role, but like all things 2020, it seems like it has been a lot longer than that! Thank you, Lili, from the bottom of my heart.

There is one more person I would like to thank for his tireless efforts on behalf of St. Mary's, and that is my husband, Pete. Many clergy spouses take a hands-off approach to parish life, but ever since we arrived, Pete has been the driving force behind revamping the website and social media presence, editing the weekly newsletter, singing in our choir, and always being available to lend a hand. During the pandemic, he has served as a full-time volunteer, and in addition to the jobs I just mentioned, has been instrumental in getting our services online, editing recorded events such as Twelfth Night, putting together Sunday bulletins, serving as an acolyte and lector, coordinating with contractors at the church, and volunteering many hours at the food pantry. To say "I couldn't do it without you," would be the understatement of the century. Thank you.

Most of what I have covered so far in my report has to do with the temporal side of things. Let's not lose sight of the spiritual dimension of church. After all, that is why we are here, isn't it? While I enjoy projects and the satisfaction of a job well done, my primary role here is as a spiritual and moral guide to not only the parish, but the community as a whole. It is never an easy job. As Archbishop Fulton Sheen said, "The priest is not his own." And while my life has been set aside for a special and very distinct role in the church, I am nevertheless still a human like us all. I do my best, just like you. We are quite a mixed bag of people with differing views and persuasions, yet

united in what really matters--the love of God and a desire to worship him in the beauty of holiness and to show our love for him by showing it to others. After an unimaginable year, and facing an uncertain future, we all find ourselves feeling exhausted and a bit raw. Let us pray for God's grace to give us the strength to persevere and to bear one another's burdens with charity and forbearance. And let us pray for God's blessing on the worship and work of this parish, that we may serve him in holiness both now and evermore.