

Rector's Report 2023

Perhaps because of the stamp display case at the post office, since 2020 I have been more keenly aware than I think I ever have of the lunar new year. The USPS produces some really fun stamps with that theme. 2020 was, of course, the year of the rat. Next was the year of the tiger. And now, at last, the year of the rabbit, a cute, fluffy bunny, right? Well, I recently saw an internet meme which featured a still shot from Monty Python and the Quest for the Holy Grail. In case you are unfamiliar with this classic, just type "Monty Python Killer Rabbit" into Youtube. Props to Frank Sager for this one. The moral of the last few years has been, "proceed with caution."

We have all adapted to a world in which we are far more conscious of not only our own personal health, but also about how our actions and decisions can have an impact on the health of others. I think the notion of "sick days" is going the way of the dodo. If you don't feel well, stay home if possible. Have a sniffle? It's now socially acceptable to wear a mask. It really is amazing how quickly norms can change in the face of disaster.

Here at St. Mary's, 2022 did bring a return to more of what we remember as "normal," though I think that we are still growing into our "post-covid" selves. I perceived a change in attitude for the good. Perhaps because our generalized anxiety levels have tapered off, or maybe because we are better equipped to thrive in our current reality, there was a palpable spirit of positivity, enthusiasm, and a can-do attitude that only makes us stronger.

The year began with two big projects: living room renovations at the rectory, and the installation of a massive shoring system under the main stairs of the church in anticipation of their restoration. While incredibly messy, with plaster dust in every conceivable nook and cranny all throughout the house, the living room work is complete, and I hope that you all like what we have done. Having a nice, warm fire on a cold winter night really makes a house a home. On the other hand, the work on the main stairs of the church has stalled, and we are weighing our options with an eye to completing the project this year. I think the vestry members will agree with me that this has been a deeply frustrating and expensive, but nonetheless educational experience.

At the end of February, I attended the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes conference along with JoAnn Hanson and Allen Barnett. It was held in Atlanta, and was my first in-person conference in quite a while. It was exciting to see so many friends from around the country and to participate in the excellent presentations. At that meeting, the name of the organization was officially changed to the Episcopal Parishes Network, and Pete and I will be attending this year's conference in Jacksonville, Florida in March.

In March we restarted our Sunday School program, spearheaded by Sally Sonne, with help from Kimberly Breiland and Aoife Geoghegan. It is such an important ministry and I am very grateful that we now have options for children most Sundays, with childcare for small children and Sunday school for those ages 5-12. Children 10 and older are encouraged to participate in the service as acolytes or lectors.

In early April, we hosted Bishop Allen Shin as he made his episcopal visitation to St. Mary's, an event that was put off for two years. Welcoming one of our bishops was truly a joyful way in which we began to feel more fully alive and connected last year. The Bishop confirmed three and received one into the fellowship of the Episcopal Church. Also in April, we were finally able to gather solemnly as a community and say a proper goodbye to Pam Cromey, the beloved late wife of our Rector Emeritus, and a pillar of the community. We also greeted with joy the Resurrection of our Lord on Easter Sunday, finally being able to sing out, "Jesus Christ is risen today, alleluia!" at the top of our lungs for the first time since 2019. I know that I will never again take that for granted.

By May we were all suffering from Spring fever and wanted to get outdoors. There were plenty of options as we kicked off summer in Tuxedo with a really lovely garden party hosted by Kimberly Breiland and Adam Patrick to benefit our summer camp scholarship program. Later, we had our Spring cocktail party at the Tuxedo Club, which I hope will become an annual event. Finally, at the end of the month, St. Mary's hosted Tuxedo's annual Memorial Day exercises, officially kicking off the summer season.

June is the season for graduations and weddings. I gave the invocation at the Tuxedo Park School's graduation, and was present at the George F. Baker High School graduation to distribute St. Mary's scholarships. There was also a wedding planned for the Cadet Chapel at West Point, at which I was to preside. The bride and groom came all the way from Honolulu—we had done all of our wedding preparations via Zoom across many time zones. When the big day came, the groom tested positive for covid, and the wedding party would not be allowed to enter the chapel. Well, we have become experts at pivoting on a dime, and that is just what we did. In no time, we transformed the great lawn of St. Mary's into a beautiful outdoor wedding chapel under the magnolia tree, complete with flowers from the rectory garden. The couple were delighted with the service, though the poor groom couldn't even attend his own reception!

The summer months also saw our popular outdoor movie nights, as well as the hymn-sing on the lake.

In August, we said goodbye to our faithful iPhones which served us well for two years and powered up our new three-camera livestream system. Many thanks to Calvin DeMond for all of his continuing help in ironing out the kinks and Serge Audio for all of his expert help. (Ask yourself, what other church has an Emmy-winning cameraman running the livestream? We are truly blessed.)

In the fall, we inaugurated our stewardship campaign for 2023 under the able leadership of Inger Grüterich. We also rebooted the progressive dinner, which proved to be so popular that we had to provide emergency overflow seating at the rectory and at the Neuhausers. It was a heavy lift, but financially successful and very well received. Thank you to everyone who made it possible.

We also returned to Tuxedo Family Fun Day in the fall at which, in a ministry first, I was asked to be an apple pie judge; two of my favorite things, pie and judging. You can't ask for much more than that! Our annual St. Francis Sunday pet blessing was also a big hit, with the children telling the story of St. Francis, and the church filled with furry friends eager for a blessing and a treat!

In November, B, Pete, and I represented St. Mary's at the diocesan convention, which was held over the course of two days at the Westchester Marriott. In addition to the usual procedural items, "fun" was intentionally added to the agenda, and on Friday we danced the night away at the "Episco-disco." Later, in early December, the three of us again represented St. Mary's at the bishop electing convention held in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. It was an exciting experience, and an honor to participate in charting the future of our diocese. Congratulations to the Rev. Matt Heyd (a friend of St. Mary's) on being elected Bishop Coadjutor.

As always, Christmas was simply magical here at St. Mary's. The liturgies, the music, and the decorations all worked together to help us welcome the birth of Jesus Christ in the beauty of holiness. Thank you to all who made it possible with donations of time, talent, and funds. It was also our great pleasure to reopen the rectory to Christmas guests with our first open house since 2019.

Throughout the year, I am active in other aspects of our community. I feel that living out our vocation as a spiritual home for everyone in our community requires me to be an active and visible part of it, thereby demonstrating our level of commitment. I have heard it said aloud at a meeting of the Sloatsburg Food Pantry board, "God bless the Episcopalians." Outside of St. Mary's, I represent you as: a board member of the Sloatsburg Food Pantry, as chaplain to the Promenade Senior Living Facility, as Dean of the Episcopal churches in most of Orange and all of Sullivan Counties, as President of the Tuxedo Park Garden Club, and as a member of the Tuxedo Park Tree Advisory Board. As word of my gardening prowess has spread, I am now also a part of the Town of Tuxedo Pollinator Meadow project.

By the sacrament numbers, it was a busy year:

Eucharist 162

Baptisms 5

Confirmations/Receptions 4

Weddings 3

Burials 3

As you can see, we pack a lot into a year at St. Mary's. Our life together takes a great deal of dedication and commitment, and we must never lose sight of the reason we do all of this in the first place: we exist to glorify God, to preach and live the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to go forth into the world in the power of the Spirit to heal the sick, minister to the poor, and bind up the broken hearted. I know that there is no way I could do my work without all of you. I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you, with special thanks to:

Our Music Ministry—Sheldon, Aileen, Anthony, Will, and Johanna
Music is an absolutely vital part of Christian worship, and especially in the Anglican tradition, we are fortunate to hear some of the most glorious music as we sing God's praises, and I am so very fortunate to work alongside a group of such talented and dedicated men and women. Mr. Eldridge and our *Schola Cantorum* have the absolute support of their rector as they continue their important work of rebuilding our music ministry, a task which will take careful and deliberate work over the next few years.

Altar guild—Primarily Wendy Favia, who dutifully sets up the altar for divine worship, but also the Seiberts, Serene, Sally, and the other members of the Favia family, who get called into service when extra muscle is needed.

Lay servers – all who serve as acolytes, lectors, eucharistic ministers, ushers, videographers.

Church school – Sally, Kimberly, and several young sitters. We are also very pleased to host the local Daisy troop who meet regularly in the church.

Hospitality – all those who host coffee hour throughout the year

Special events team—Lili, Jane, August, Serene, and all others who create fabulous and memorable events for our community that are not only a lot of fun and “must-do's” but also integral parts of our yearly budget.

Outreach—Sue and the Outreach Committee who do so much for our community and our world. I always think of Sue when I hear that line in the

Christmas carol, “Good King Wenceslas:” “Ye who now will bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing.”

Finance crew—JoAnn our treasurer, Natalia our bookkeeper, Charlie our investment expert, and Pete, who have worked tirelessly throughout the year to update our accounting processes to be clearer and more coherent than ever before, reflecting the needs of a church as opposed to those of a business.

Vestry—I am blessed to work with such a group of multi-talented people, and look forward to welcoming new and returning members. My sincere gratitude goes out to those who are rotating off as of this meeting.

Wardens—Lili & Dennis: When most people hear the term “warden,” they automatically think of the head of a prison. Far from being jailers, the wardens have a special direct working relationship with the rector. Thank you for your faithfulness in this ministry.

There are so many others: The Emporium, the Stewardship committee, the Pastoral Care committee, the Buildings & Grounds committee, Aivars our handyman, Greg the phantom of the churchyard, the cleaners, Pete with Communications, and of course our Rector Emeritus, Fr. Cromey.

Special recognition—Aoife (1 year work anniversary) Last year at this meeting I introduced someone to you who may have been unfamiliar at the time, but who in the past year has become well-known to you all. Aoife came into the church office one year ago and quickly learned her way around our systems (many of which were brand new). As we have gotten to know one another, Aoife has shown herself to be a diligent, forthright, hard working person who does not shy away from going the extra mile. She has a way with people and also dogs. Whenever Emmy visits the office, she spends most of her time under Aoife’s desk—not mine. Thank you, Aoife, and congratulations on your one year anniversary. Here’s to many more.

Vision for 2023—As I mentioned at the beginning of my presentation, I feel that we have turned a corner in our most recent journey together. There is a feeling of collaboration, good will, and a desire to grow—not just

numerically or financially, but spiritually and corporately. I have been approached by a parishioner who wants to form a committee for the improvement of Bentley Hall (and Sommaripa). This kind of energy is just what we need, and it in turn energizes me. Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Like all fishermen, we must never grow weary of casting out our nets. Sometimes when we haul them up they will be empty, sometimes they will be full. When we repeatedly pull up empty nets where once they were full, we must not be afraid to try fishing in a different part of the sea where we may have never been before.

While we will never look exactly like we did in 2019, I am not worried. We were delighted this year to welcome several new families to St. Mary's who have jumped in with both feet. Others who had drifted away have returned, and our Sunday attendance has been on an upward trajectory throughout 2022—let's keep that going! People remain generous, and we exceeded our stewardship goal for the year by more than \$10,000—let's also keep that up! And if you have not yet filled out your pledge card for 2023, not to worry! We have plenty here today, and if you don't do it today, expect a phone call...

Most importantly, let's make 2023—this year of the rabbit—a year in which we take stock of where we have been in recent times, accept our current reality, and resolve (with God's help) to move forward in faith, growing intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually closer to our God and one another.