

Rector's Annual Report

January 16, 2022

In addition to my duties here, I have been actively engaging in the broader community and church by serving on the Police Reform Committee (as I stated earlier), as President of the Tuxedo Park Garden Club, as a member of the Tuxedo Park Tree Advisory Board, a board member of the Sloatsburg Food Pantry, chair of the Mid-Hudson Board of Managers, area Dean, and chaplain to the Promenade Senior Living facility in town.

Of course, operating a church like St. Mary's takes a group-effort. I would like to thank the staff members and volunteers who work so tirelessly for the good of our church: Our organist and choir director, Sheldon Eldridge and our two fine vocalists, Aileen Sager and Anthony Cinelli; our fearless bookkeeper Natalia and her husband Aivars who works on many maintenance projects at the church and rectory throughout the year; thanks also to the wardens, Lili Neuhauser and Dennis Trotter, and all the members of the vestry, who each bring a special talent and unique perspective to the group. And to all of the other volunteers on Sundays and throughout the week, I say thank you.

I would be remiss if I did not also say thank you to Pete Datos, who, in addition to being active in a host of other church activities, served as our volunteer office administrator for over a year. He oversaw the transition of the office to French House, and has single-handedly upgraded all of the church's operating systems. We are all truly grateful for your dedication.

Despite his talents, Pete is very happy to retire from his church position and hand the reins over to Aoife Geoghegan, my new administrative assistant, who started on January 3. If you haven't met her already, please stop by the office to introduce yourself. She is there Mondays - Thursdays from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Aoife brings with her a wealth of experience and proficiency, as well as a friendly greeting. She has jumped in with both feet, and has already begun to get the office rhythm going. I am really excited to be working alongside her. Welcome, Aoife!

I commend everyone who has helped St. Mary's get through the last two years with positive attitudes, loving hearts, and willing hands. Going forward, we clearly can't predict the future, but I am hopeful that this spring we will finally round a corner with the pandemic and be able to truly develop a plan for a new chapter of life and ministry here. We need to be realistic and acknowledge that there will be no "light switch" moment, just as there will be no time-machine. Imagining and working toward our future will take time, prayer, imagination, and most importantly, engagement.

Let me start with good news. St. Mary's is OK—more than ok, we are healthy and well-positioned for the post-pandemic future. As a dean, I attend monthly meetings with all of the other deans, diocesan staff, and our bishops. A big part of our meetings is the "check-in," in which we each have a turn to inform the others what is happening in our respective deaneries. There is a common thread, unfortunately, which describes churches in urban, suburban, and rural areas alike, and that is the decline in people, which translates into a decrease in operating funds. From Staten Island to Dutchess County, churches are having to form clusters of collaborative ministries in order to survive. On Staten Island, for example, where twenty years ago there were five full-time rectors, today there are two. Priests and their people are truly struggling, but out of this struggle comes creativity and the hope for a new model of sustainable ministry.

So, while we certainly do have challenges to face here at St. Mary's, and while we do have to be prudent with the resources we have, and be always actively cultivating them, we are nowhere near the state that some of our fellow congregations are in, nor will we be at any time soon. Let me repeat, we are healthy.

Just add people. But how? That's the \$64,000 question, and as we emerge from a pandemic state, there will be some golden opportunities to re-connect with old friends as well as to make new ones. We must be on guard, though, to make our faith, and not worldly anxieties, our guide. In the words of the hymn (665), "All my hope on God is founded; he doth still my trust renew, me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true."

In the next few years, I foresee some things changing permanently, whereas other old staples of church life will need to be resurrected. I am thinking especially about ministry to children and youth in our community. After decades of service, Prudence Thurston retired from her work as Sunday school director, and in the spring, both she and George were honored for all of their dedication to St. Mary's over the years. A traditional Sunday school is essential, and we really need to find the right person to pick up where Prudence left off, but we also need to look at new ideas about how to reach and engage children and youth in ways that might be outside the context of Sunday church services.

We need to be clear-eyed about our context as well. What works well in a large, suburban, multi-clergy parish, might not be possible here. We must also consider demographics. Tuxedo is a small and aging community—last year's graduating class at Baker High numbered fewer than 20, only one of whom was a St. Mary's parishioner. The students at TPS come from 36 ZIP codes. We are also geographically locked in between mountain ranges, the railroad, a river and the thruway. There is one way in, and one way out. And of course, the gate. One really has to know that they are welcome and want to come here. Nationally, it is estimated that 30% of people who attended church regularly pre-pandemic are simply not coming back. I am encouraged that there seems to be some movement with Tuxedo Farms, but any benefit for St. Mary's from that is still years off. Needless to say, I will need your help and engagement with getting the good word out about St. Mary's.

There are already some good things happening as they relate to children and youth. I was told that we ought to offer a confirmation class in order to get children engaged. Well, worldwide pandemic and the fact that bishop's visitations were canceled for nearly two years notwithstanding, we now have one. Starting in February, we will meet on Saturday afternoons at 4:30, immediately preceding the evening service at 5:00. Bishop Shin will be visiting us on Sunday, April 3 (the Sunday before Palm Sunday). We currently have one confirmand signed up, and one adult who wishes to be received into the Episcopal Church. So, if you know of any person who will be 13 or older by April 3 and wishes to be confirmed, just let me know. The more the merrier!

Another positive development is the presence of the Daisies (girl scouts), who are regularly making use of our facility. I am also really encouraged by the new energy Kimberly Breiland is putting into forming a community activities committee, which would be focused on breathing new life into Tuxedo, with St. Mary's as a hub.

Our ship is strong. It has weathered many storms in the past, and will weather this one as well. However, in addition to the gales and crashing waves of the pandemic, our ship is also fighting a current of negativity and toxic hearsay that threaten to take us far off course, making our journey toward tomorrow unnecessarily fraught, and robbing us of much-needed human and financial resources. In the last year, the vestry and I have endured some really harsh and politicized criticisms and accusations not based in fact on a number of fronts. This has got to stop. No one wants to attend a church where they can sense this kind of self-serving drama. Undermining the leadership of St. Mary's is, quite plainly, undermining St. Mary's itself. St. Mary's is a church where the Gospel is preached, where we reach out in love to our neighbors, and where we speak up for those who can't speak for themselves. These are not only Christian values, but moral and humanitarian, as well.

In the words of a wise and compassionate man, "Let us always presume positive intent." Everyone who has been involved in the running of the church in the face of great odds is doing their absolute best. Like parenthood, Church doesn't come with an instruction manual. In the midst of so much uncertainty, we live our lives as a community of faith, hope, and charity, gladly bearing one another's burdens; rejoicing with those who rejoice, and mourning with those who weep. As you know, St. Mary's and all churches face an uphill climb. Let's do so together joyfully, with a spirit of cooperation, humility, and mutual forbearance. We are all cheerleaders, encouragers, and our best advertising, so let's keep our message positive and Christ-focused. As holy scripture reminds us, "They will know we are Christians by our love."