

Envisioning our future

Learning the skills (and benefits) of foresight

As I write this, I've just returned from a silent retreat at the beautiful Seven Oaks Retreat Center and nature sanctuary in Madison, Virginia. Located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge, the center places a special emphasis on the care and growth of the trees on the property. As a result, the oaks, cedars and pines grow tall and flourish on the surrounding acreage.



By Susan Wilkes

One evening, I watched a storm coming in, the enormous trees swaying gracefully with the gathering winds. Even the tallest trees that had stretched toward the light of the sun earlier that day now moved rhythmically with the blowing currents. I recalled the effects of previous storms I had seen on my walks through the woods earlier that day – some trees had toppled while others stretched to even greater heights.

What enables a tree to thrive despite the weather is, in part, the depth and breadth of its root system. The primary roots, called taproots, often extend as deep as the height of the tree, gathering nutrients from the soil and providing a strong anchor during winds.

This is true for organizations like churches, too. Parishes grow best by reaching for the light of Christ. And churches need deep and profound roots that give us a strong base during the movement of wind around us. With both rootedness and adaptability in the face of change, we become ancient and wise. We flourish. This fall, St. Stephen's begins a process where we will together explore future trends affecting the church, how society is evolving, and how our ministries can reach even greater heights. Parishioners can be involved first through some forecasting sessions where we'll consider societal changes that are already—or might in the future—create some wind around St. Stephen's. Gary Jones will share some tools from his recent trip to the Institute for the Future and lead interested parishioners in learning the skills of foresight.

Also this fall, we'll take a closer look at our many ministries – what deeply rooted values they embody, how and when they were started, along with how they have evolved over time to the present. We'll ponder how ministries often have adapted with the winds of changing circumstances.

Many church leadership experts believe, however, that these particular changing circumstances now are dramatic, uncharted territory. One has likened the situation churches face to what the Lewis and Clark expedition faced as it sought to remain true to its mission – to find a Northwest waterway passage to the Pacific Ocean. When they got to the source of the Missouri River, they were sure that on the other side of this rise would be a gentle slope to the river that would carry them gently to the Pacific. Instead, when they crested the rise with their canoes, they saw the Rocky Mountains! It was an entirely new journey ahead, and what got them to this point would not take them through the Rockies.

So which is it? Is St. Stephen's like a deeply rooted tree seeking new growth, or more like an expedition through uncharted territory? Both! Our convictions and our deepest values will allow us to grow and flourish, to press into the future with confidence even as we consider entirely new ways to fulfill our inspiring mission.

Thus, parishioners will be invited to gather with others who are involved in particular ministries to reflect on these topics. A leadership group has identified 24 vibrant ministry areas at St. Stephen's, along with ministry liaisons for each.

Another way parishioners can be active in Envisioning Our Future is by reading a series of four brief articles and perhaps offering a comment about them on a blog dedicated to this project. Go to ststephensRVA.org/future. In his introduction to these four articles, Gary Jones writes that these remarkable times we live in provide “a great opportunity for the church to rise, flourish, and tend to the world's greatest needs.” As it explores new and innovative ways to do so, St. Stephen's enduring values provide it with profound rootedness and strength. ❁

Susan Wilkes is the consultant working with St. Stephen's on the 'Envisioning Our Future' process.