

ENVISIONING OUR FUTURE

St. Stephen's embarked upon an ambitious two-year project in 2018, with a goal of reviewing our ministries and envisioning ways to position them for the future. In this way, the church is being pro-active about the continued vitality of the parish. The process is similar to the planning processes that the church undertook in the 1980s. However, the pace of societal change has accelerated so radically that we are putting less emphasis on the development of a specific "Work Plan" and focusing more on a re-orienting evaluation that will allow us both to take stock of our present ministries and remain nimble with regard to the future.

The goals of the project are for the ministries to:

1. increase our appreciation for our rich and complex parish church,
2. increase our understanding of the evolution of church and society,
3. identify and strengthen core values that should guide our present ministries and give rise to future ministries, and
4. build capacities that enable us to respond effectively to social and cultural change.

Rather than a traditional focused strategic planning process, the project was designed to allow ample room for reflection, learning, and the movement of the Holy Spirit. Envisioning our Future began in summer 2018 and will extend through spring of 2020.

Inspired by our rector Gary Jones' vision for the project, consultant Susan Wilkes worked in close collaboration with church staff and a leadership team of lay leaders to begin the project. Leadership team members include long-time parishioners John Bates, Becky Boyers, Brack Hill, Allison Koschak, and Betsy Tyson. The project also engages liaisons for each of 23 broad ministry areas. Ministry liaisons were recommended by clergy and staff for their knowledge of the church, active engagement, and interpersonal skills. The ministry liaisons' role is to guide parishioners from their ministries through the process, following guidelines provided by the leadership team.

In the early summer of 2018, Gary Jones went to the Institute for the Future in Palo Alto, California, to learn about various approaches to forecasting and planning. Also during the summer, liaisons began the project by reading a series of stimulating articles regarding changes in the Episcopal Church and society, and how those changes are impacting spiritual life. Gary wrote an introduction to each article, providing context and some focused questions for reflection.

For communication purposes, communications director Sarah Bartenstein developed a project landing page on St. Stephen's Web site so that all related information can be posted and easily found. For example, while the liaisons had the particular "assignment" to read the articles, all articles were posted on the site so that anyone who was interested could read them. Susan Wilkes is also writing an article on the project for each edition of **Seasons of the Spirit**, the parish's quarterly journal, as a way of sharing project progress widely.

In the late summer, liaisons gathered for rich discussions about the articles and how they related to St. Stephen's. For example, liaisons shared reflections about Gary's question: "Can a parish church be a meeting place for the deep, spiritual seeking and engagement that people long for? If so, what needs to change?"

In their discussions, liaisons noted that while reading about the struggles of other churches was sobering, St. Stephen's has already been innovating in response to societal change. As a result, this church has a great deal of vibrancy and relevance already. Participants expressed enthusiasm for the project as a way of making sure that continues.

In the early fall of 2018, Gary and Susan held training sessions for the liaisons on how to begin work on the first phase of the project. Gary shared perspectives on a faithful and caring approach to working with parishioners in the process while Susan stressed the importance of including everyone who was interested. Susan provided the liaisons with a written guide for their first meetings with their ministry areas, including an outline for the session and questions for discussion.

Liaisons generated a list of people to invite and then touched base with an appointed clergy or staff contact person to see if additional people should be included. Betsy Lee and Janet Allen coordinated materials and meeting rooms for the ministry meetings. These meetings lasted 1.5 hours and were arranged at convenient times. All meeting times were listed in the church's weekly email newsletter, printed newsletter, and on the Web site; sessions were open to anyone who was interested.

The fall 2018 ministry meetings focused on two key topics:

1. Identifying core values of St. Stephen's. Liaisons provided a list of sample values that had been generated by the liaisons during their training session. Parishioners in the meeting reflected upon and shared which values resonated the most for them personally. Afterward, each person wrote down their "top three" values and gave those to the liaison.
2. Liaisons used a set of questions to lead a "looking back" discussion with their ministry. The questions focused on how the ministry first formed, key inflection points along the way, and where parishioners felt a sense of God's call in their work.

Ministry liaisons submitted the results of the values exercise and Susan Wilkes then tabulated them. While many values were endorsed, eight values clearly resonated for most parishioners: **acceptance, community, inclusivity, love/loving, serving/service, spiritual growth, welcoming, and worship**. Interestingly, spiritual growth was the most frequently noted value. Parishioners will continue to explore the meaning of these values in the coming months.

Liaisons crafted two-page summaries of the "looking back" discussions and these will be available on the Web site once all are finalized. At this writing in early January, all but three reports have been turned in. Susan Wilkes wrote a brief summary of the reports for the next

edition of **Seasons of the Spirit**. The article reflects the joyful spirit of the discussions and the ways in which the ministries of St. Stephen's have evolved over the years. Leadership team members are currently reviewing the reports and providing feedback to the ministry liaisons.

The values discovery process will continue at a February Forum so that more people have the opportunity to be involved. Susan will also create a way for individuals not present at the Forum to participate in the ongoing discussion of core values. As noted, reports on "looking back" will be posted on the website once finalized.

During the spring 2019 semester, the ministry liaisons will engage their groups in an analysis of the current state of their ministry. This will follow a "SAINT" analysis format, with groups discussing the **S**trengths, **A**spirations, **I**mprovements needed, identify the **N**eeds of society that this ministry area will serve, and **T**rends in society related to their ministry. Gary and Susan will again provide support and training for the liaisons, with those meetings to occur in March 2019.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan Wilkes