

# Full of grace and power

**E**nvisioning our Future, St. Stephen's process for reviewing our ministries and ensure future vitality, finished the "looking back" phase in December. Parishioners from 24 areas of parish life reflected on each area's unique history through an exercise examining its roots, how it has evolved over time, what changes have affected it, and where we have felt God's call in the work. The reflections from each cohort were heartfelt and beautiful, as captured in the note from one participant that "the mystical body of faith is shared in everything these ministries do."

Since the founding of St. Stephen's in 1910, the ministries of the church have continued to grow and evolve. At times, ministries were formed in response to clear needs in the community. For example, while St. Stephen's had been giving food to those in need for some time, the formal food pantry was established in response to an increase in food insecurity during the recession. Services in Palmer Hall were begun to meet the needs of the growing number of young families coming to St. Stephen's. At other times, ministries have grown out of the passion of an individual or small group of parishioners who envision sharing God's presence through, for example, a prayer shawl knitting group, a chapter of Daughters of the King, visitors to the Richmond City Jail, or icon writers.

Ministries have adapted well as societal changes came about and as the church grew. The influx of women into the workplace and women's ordination brought about changes in women's ministries in the 1970s, while growing interest in wellness and nutrition catalyzed the formation of the farmers market and wellness ministries. Many groups spoke about the impact of technology, at times from a positive perspective such as how St. Stephen's is in many ways a global congregation via electronic communities or how the contemplative practices at St. Stephen's meet a deep longing for stillness and quiet. Others noted the challenges of technology such as their addictive nature, their impact on children, or the way they can lower our sense of connection.

Throughout the summaries provided by ministry liaisons, one gets a sense of the resilience of the ministries and how the most difficult of circumstances can lead to new beginnings. One moving example of this is how our partnerships in the East End grew out of the shooting death of Jamie Knight, son of David and Jeannie Knight, and the healing work of the church in its aftermath. (David was then associate rector, and both Jamie and Jeannie taught in St. Stephen's Preschool.) The realization that this violence, while unusual for the St. Stephen's community, was happening with tragic regularity in the East End, led to new awareness and a commitment to know

our neighbors more deeply, to learn from them, and to do what we could to address issues that affect them.



*By Susan Wilkes*

St. Stephen's has grown not only in size but also in the diversity of its membership. Many groups talked about their commitment to welcoming all who come here. Newer offerings such as our Sunday evening services (Celtic Evensong and Communion, and sung Compline) and Sunday Community Supper strive to reach those not traditionally affiliated with church. One group indicated that an important message of the St. Stephen's brand is "There is a place for you here." Indeed, the "Village Green" concept so evident in the development of the Sunday supper, café, grocery store/food ministry, and farmers market, seeks to make the church a common area where

people can come together as a community even if they are not "members" in the traditional sense.

Perhaps the most moving aspect of the groups' collective reflection is the clarity with which participants sense God's calling in their work, where they "feel the presence of the holy and experience joy," as one person put it. Whether it's the parishioner taking fruit to a senior citizen, the healing prayer minister laying hands on a congregant's shoulders, a member of the men's group sharing a deep challenge, or the greeter who looks for God in each new face, all report a sense of their powerful spiritual growth through ministering to others. As one person noted, "The Holy Spirit leads us to listen and respect. We receive in our giving."

Also evident is the depth of participants' dedication to and love for the ministries in which they are involved. One liaison wrote beautifully regarding her tears "at the love and gratitude and enthusiasm from these committee members" towards their work.

May our "love and gratitude and enthusiasm" continue as we envision what lies ahead for our vibrant offerings. May we continue to follow in the way of Stephen, our patron saint, who "full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." (Acts 6:8) ❖

**The Envisioning our Future project** will continue this spring as ministry areas analyze their current state, including strengths, aspirations for the future, opportunities for improvement, needs in society, and trends. Everyone is welcome to participate. Meeting times will be noted at [ststephensRVA.org/future](http://ststephensRVA.org/future), and in the weekly **eSpirit** emails and printed **Spirit** newsletter.