

REPORT OF THE RECTOR

On November 5, 2016 The Diocese of Massachusetts affirmed our new Mission Strategy, which begins: *“God is calling to us to look ahead and to embrace brave change. As fewer people turn to the church as a source of solace and strength, more than ever we yearn to know and be known by God and one another. In a world plagued by grievous conflict, injustice, and poverty, God gives us the courage to be agents of reconciliation, justice, and abundance. There will be difficult choices for us as followers of Jesus. It is only through ongoing, prayerful discernment together that we will find a path to a faithful future.”*

It goes on to state: *“We will embrace brave change by **reimagining our congregations** to better respond to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our time and place; **building our relationships** to unite as one body in Christ; **and engaging our world** to reconcile ourselves and all people to one another, and all of Creation to God.”*

As I reflect on the life of St. Stephen’s Memorial Episcopal Church in 2016, it seems we already embody much that our Diocese seeks to be. Undoubtedly, we receive over \$150,000 annually in Diocesan support for this reason. Unlike some congregations, we are not a mission included in the Diocesan budget; rather, we create and engage in ministries that the Diocese wants to support—training newly ordained clergy and young adult interns, KIC summer camp, KIC music after school, summer learning, African outreach ministries, women’s group, new signs, green grants for windows, and racial reconciliation. Further, in 2016, the Diocese committed to partner with the Episcopal Church to provide \$100,000 a year for two years to support the development of Spanish-language worship, formation, and fellowship at St. Stephen’s.

The reports in this Annual Report speak to long-standing ministries such as worship, Church School, youth groups, and music, all reimagining how we nurture and form today’s church. Church School has reorganized around monthly themes with teams of teachers leading classes once a month. Middle school, high school, and young adult groups work to weave support systems for young people coming of age in complicated times. Music is introducing Gospel Sundays, bringing in occasional soloists, and offering contemporary Christian music to bring more variety to our program. Living Word Worship allows us to explore Biblical themes through music, word, and sacrament. And sermon conversations remind us that God speaks to each one of us and that we need to listen to each other’s stories.

In addition, new ministries are pushing us to reimagine who we are, what it means to be church, and how we use our buildings. KIC Music welcomes several dozen children to the building 4 days a week to drum and play on their keyboards; we are a noisy, lively, sometimes messy place most afternoons. Be You invites GLBTQ+ teens and their allies to hang out in a safe space every Tuesday and opened our churchyard and church to several hundred young people at Lynn’s First Youth Pride. The new Women’s Group hears and holds the lives of women engaging parenting, grandparenting, and just plain living in a changed and changing world. The St. Stephen’s and ECCO Beloved Community Teams challenge us to address the difficult and sometimes divisive issues of race, class, and privilege, both within our congregation and in our community.

Reimagining the church is not easy, especially for those of us who “love the church.” Sometimes we long for what used to be. But we know that God warns the people of Israel in exile not to look back with longing but to build and plant where they find themselves, and to trust that God is “doing a new thing.” Some of our experiments in 2016 didn’t work or required adjustments or stressed our systems and staff or disrupted our status quo. No doubt, St. Stephen’s is a learning lab for the Episcopal Church of the future, which is both uncomfortable and exciting. Surely, God is calling us to “embrace brave change.”

Another key element of the new Diocesan Mission Strategy is building relationships. Within our walls and beyond, we encourage each one of us to deepen our relationships with God, with our church, and with our neighbors. There are lots of doors into and out of St. Stephen's, and each one invites us into community. Whether we come for contemplative prayer or choir practice, for a fundraiser or Sunday worship, for YA dinners or Knit Club, for fixing a faucet or saying a prayer, for Tea & Talk or Bible Study, for KIC or Healing Eucharist, for Beloved Community Team or Pastoral Care Team, for Altar Guild or Food Pantry, for an ECCO Action or Church School, for counseling or a community dinner, for NA or Kiswahili worship, for Be You or Vestry... whatever door, whatever day, St. Stephen's invites each one of us to deepen the relationships that sustain us and build the Kingdom of God. Yet, even as our Mission Statement attests that we "cross lines of color, class, culture, and generation," 2016 has reminded us that conversations about race create tension; young people in the building create noise and mess; there are complications in respecting varieties of political perspectives; and without intentionality, multiple worshiping communities do not mix and form relationships easily.

Even so, we ground our relationships in God and the church. From that holy place, we share our lives with each other and strengthen our church community. And then, we reach out to our neighbors, offering a safe space to rest, a welcoming place to gather, programs for young people, free food, Christmas gifts, and advocacy for a more just world. Whether it's ECCO, MCAN, or PICO; the Hunger Network, My Brother's Table, or the Lynn Community Health Center; the Deanery, Mission Hub, or Diocese; Episcopal City Mission, the Mission Institute, or Be Peace; Life Together, Diocesan Youth Programs or BCH Camp; St. Andrew's Marblehead, St. James Cambridge, or Trinity Haverhill; or other Lynn non-profits, people look to St. Stephen's not just as a desirable partner but as a leader.

Of course, undeveloped and broken relationships limit our ability to be the people and community God would have us be. Within church, we often exist in our own pods; we engage the aspects of life and leadership we know we enjoy and ignore the rest. Sometimes the only limits are interest and inclination; but other times there are relational barriers. Perhaps, we had a disagreement with a person or organization in the past and have no interest in repairing the breach. Upon occasion, we feel burdened by all that life and the church expect of us and resent those who fail to "step up", not knowing the reality of their life. The life of the church requires that we repair those gaps and build relationships.

In addition, out-dated systems and structures of communication limit our ability to form relationships and build community. We rely too heavily on information flowing to and through the clergy. And, we are trapped in print and paper in a largely digital world. The 2017 budget includes resources for full implementation of a new database, which will facilitate communication with particular cohorts within the parish and reduce mailing list errors; luckily, our new Office Manager Rachel Pfof is excited to facilitate these changes. Technology Sunday in December launched our effort to collect emails so that we can communicate more immediately and inexpensively; and the Treasurer's Office is working to set up on-line giving.

In the Diocese, even as we push 138 Tremont to move people, programs, and money out of Boston, we sometimes resent the use of our photos on promotional materials; the inclusion of our advocacy work as testimony to Diocesan engagement; or the necessity of our presence "in the conversation."

We are the body of Christ. Body systems and parts are distinct, essential, and interdependent. We've joked a lot in 2016 about "The Knee Club" as several members have experienced knee replacement surgery. But each of those people would attest to the ways in which suffering in one part physically and emotionally affected the whole; and the restoration of one part created freedom and healing. Being the body of Christ challenged the Corinthians in Paul's day and it challenges the people of St.

Stephen's today. Relationships at all levels are hard work. They take time and require us to be willing to risk our own comfort and control. Being in relationship with God or another person, opens us to the possibility—perhaps even the probability-- of change. Surely, God is calling us to “embrace brave change.”

Finally, our Diocesan Mission Strategy invites us to engage the world. As the Vestry which chose me as priest-in-charge and the Vestry which called me as Rector know, I am here and I stay here because St. Stephen's understands that the church exists for the good of the world and not for our own comfort and security. Our Mission Statement affirms that we “seek transformation of our lives and our community through Christ's Gospel of love, compassion, and justice.” God calls us to “reconcile all things to God in Christ.”

Our Annual Report offers abundant stories of St. Stephen's engaging the world through KIC summer camp and after school music programs, our multi-service Food Pantry and Christmas Toy Drive, our community youth programs and young adult groups, our elder housing provided at St. Stephen's Tower Apartments, our collaboration with the Food Project in gardening and teaching about food justice, and, of course, our work with ECCO, MCAN, and PICO advocating for racial justice, economic equity, and immigration reform. We do charity and we do justice.

The challenge for St. Stephen's is that “engaging the world” is not solely the work of the few who like “political” or “outreach” ministries. Engaging the world is the mission of God; it is the reason the church exists. We gather for fellowship and formation so that we are strengthened to be Christ in the world. All of us need St. Stephen's to feed our spirits, form our faith, and nurture our hope because it is hard to be called to transform our community and our world to ensure that the dignity of every human being and all creation are respected. Surely, God is calling us to “embrace brave change.”

Notably, our new Diocesan Mission Strategy says nothing about church buildings. Yet, we at St. Stephen's invest considerable time, talent, money, and pride in our physical plant. Almost a decade ago, the Vestry engaged in prayerful discernment about the future of our buildings. The core question addressed was: Is our historic church the burden that will overwhelm us so that we cannot give ourselves to God's mission or is it the physical space and spiritual inspiration that will bless us in the work God has given us to do? The commitment made by that Vestry was to work to ensure that our physical plant would be a blessing to us and our community. The Vestry made this decision because we are well-located to engage the work into which God calls us; our buildings are of considerable historical and artistic value; and people in Lynn need sacred spaces to feed their souls.

In 2016, we completed Chancel Restoration Part II, which we hope will eliminate water incursion in the chancel, and the chancel windows and children's altar Tiffany Windows have gone to Serpentino Studios for restoration. Already, the work of restoration has been slower and more expensive than any of us imagined. To continue the work, it is clear we must prioritize creating and implementing a plan for paying for past and funding future restoration work. In addition, we must find ways that the building can support itself. We have a lot of space, which we struggle to use efficiently and collaboratively. We fund insufficient custodial hours in our budget to manage and maintain a plant as large and active as ours. And, we have no system for making our space available for short or long term rentals. Thanks especially to the Clorans, we have spread the good news of the beauty of our building; and thanks to Chris Trahan, we have made ourselves a favorite of the Massachusetts Historical Commission. And thanks to many of you who have given generously through the TogetherNow Campaign and other gifts, restoration work is underway. But, God is still calling us to “embrace brave change.”

Especially in Advent, we talk about the reality that the kingdom of God both is and is to be. As I reflect on our life and ministry together at St. Stephen's, it strikes me that we both are the congregation God needs us to be and we are not yet all that God wants us to be. Theologian Phyllis Tickle describes 500-year cycles of the organization, disorganization, and reorganization of the church; she believes that we are living in the midst of a period of disorganization. While I tend to agree with her analysis, I'd say that St. Stephen's is part of the Advent of the new church. Deeply grounded in what has been, we seek to discern what the church needs to be and do to ground ourselves and our community in Christ's Gospel of love, compassion, and justice. Our work is challenging as we maintain the old even as we create the new, but it is a privilege to serve a church that lives on the cutting edge of what the church will be. I look forward to embracing brave change together as we reimagine our congregation, strengthen our relationships, and engage our world.

Respectfully submitted, the Rev. Jane Soyster Gould, Rector