

**State of the Parish Address 2012**  
**Christ Episcopal Church Annual Meeting**  
**Sunday, January 22, 2012**  
**The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector**

“The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I marked the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

I hope that as you heard Robert Frost’s lovely poem “The Road Not Taken” it made you smile.

I know that it does me, because it evokes memories of those times in my life when I, too, have stood at that metaphorical fork in the road of life and pondered my choice of which path to follow. As I have matured Frost’s poem has become increasingly meaningful for me, as I have come to understand that as life has presented me with choices of which path to travel, those choices are increasingly made in the context of prayerful discernment of what God desires of me and less as self-serving, analytical exercises.

Trusting God’s call of which path to take – which is invariably the one less travelled by – has made my life more serendipitous, exciting, fun, rich and ultimately holy. Which is what brings the smile to me face as I hear the poem.

This is not to say that choosing the road less traveled is an easy choice. Actually, just the opposite is true. It is a choice that demands risk-taking because it is the road less known, less certain, the one where the unexpected might happen. Jesus frequently came to those forks in the road of his journey where he had to make a choice between the well-worn, known path and the one less traveled, if traveled at all. His most poignant fork in the road came the night of his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Having to choose between the paths of going forward with his arrest, passion and death, (which lead to the resurrection of new life) or slipping away quietly into safe obscurity, he prayed to the God the Father, "Your will, not mine."

Theologically this was a choice between the road of continued bondage to sin and death and the road that leads to new life. Ours is always the same choice.

I believe that the Church in the year 2012 finds itself at the fork of two roads diverging off in two very different directions. And by "Church" I mean the macro-Church, or all of Christianity, as well as the micro-Church, which means the local parish or more specifically for us, Christ Episcopal Church in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

Several months ago I preached a sermon about the tectonic shifts that are occurring in Christianity in our own day. The Episcopal theologian and writer Phyllis Tickle calls this tectonic shift in Christianity "The Great Emergence." (Tickle's writings on The Great Emergence, by the way, will be the topic of our Wednesday evening Lenten program with St. Paul's this year.) Tickle's observation is that every five hundred years there is a great over-haul in the Church. She calls this over-haul a rummage sale, a time when the Church divests itself of those things that are no longer necessary for it to be the Church. The first emergence was when Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire. The second was the schism between the Greek and Latin Churches occurred. The third was the Protestant Reformation. The fourth great emergence is happening right now, here in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Because we are in the midst of this emergence it has not been given a name yet. Clearly God is still at work in the new creation that is being birthed. But we do have some pretty clear indications of what is changing in the process.

At the conclusion of last year's State of the Parish Address I quoted Presiding Bishop, Katherine Jefferts-Schori from her then new book, "The Heart of God." Katherine speaks of this emergence.

"Jesus' life and ministry are all about the God who calls into existence things that don't exist yet. The reign of God doesn't exist in its fullness, but we insist that's where we are going. The Episcopal Church today . . . is waiting to see what will emerge in a church that doesn't yet exist. We are eagerly expectant to see how we can partner in that emergence."

An article in a recent *Christian Century* titled “Mainline moves to trim bureaucracy” gives us one area in which the great emergence is occurring. The article focuses on a significant proposal by Bishop Stacy Sauls, who is the new operating officer in the national Episcopal Church, to trim the Byzantine bureaucracy of our National Church structure, including changing the frequency of how often our expensive triennial General Convention meets. Sauls has made this proposal because over half of the national church’s budget is currently paid out for overhead. Just like many parishes, the National Church spends the largest percentage of its budget on overhead and administration and not the proclamation of the Gospel. If approved, this proposal will be a significant change in the structure of our Church, which is not necessarily a bad thing. But it will also shift more and more responsibility and expense of the church’s work and ministries to the parish level, which will require an allocation of money to do this.

Considering that more and more parishes are facing dwindling financial resources from pledge and other income and that endowments are shrinking, this new way of being the church will be for most parishes a very challenging if not burdensome task to take on. Are you feeling the earth move yet?

This is but one small tremor. Similar tectonic shifts are occurring with declining and aging membership rolls, the negative perception of Christianity in the greater culture coupled with suspicion and disdain for anything institutional, theological and Biblical interpretations on any number of topics, the roll of women and LGBT people in the Church, and maybe most importantly the growing emergence, or maybe better put, realization of who Jesus the man was, versus Christ the deity, and who are we really called to follow as Christians?

Like in the story of Daniel and Belshazzar, the handwriting is clearly written on the wall. The days of the big corporate front office providing multiple resources for Episcopalians is headed for extinction. The days of big, resource rich parishes with lots of clergy and staff to provide multiple ministries and services to a congregation is going extinct hand-in-hand with it. Bottom line is that what we see in this Great Emergence is that everything in the Church as we have come to know it is changing. The emergence is about everything we are and have been as a Christian people and institution. And in the process something new is being birthed.

We are at the fork of the road in our journey as the Church and whether we want to or not, or whether we like it or not, we the people of the Church – macro and micro – are compelled to make a choice about which path to follow.

The initial decision is to choose between the path of pretending that there is no great emergence taking place at all and the path that recognizes and embraces this tectonic shift in Christianity. Frankly, selecting the former means we have chosen extinction. Selecting the later means that, like John of Patmos in the Book of Revelation, we have heard God’s voice from the heavenly throne proclaiming, “Behold, I am making all things new.” (Rev. 21:5)

Choosing the later means we have chosen the more challenging path because it is clearly the road un-traveled. I know that this is upsetting and un-nerving to many of us. Yet, if we are truly followers of Jesus and we seek God's guidance and trust that God will be with us than the un-traveled path will be the one that is ultimately serendipitous, exciting, fun, rich, holy and life-giving. It will be the path that makes us a part of the new creation God is birthing in Christianity.

As the Rector of the parish I am calling us to choose the less traveled path of Frost's poem. I call us to make this choice because like for the traveler in the poem it will make all the difference if we do so.

It may surprise you to learn that Christ Church has already made some significant headway down the road less traveled. Compared to other Episcopal and mainline Churches we have been extraordinarily proactive in facing the challenges that the emergence is presenting us with.

Faced with an enormous 1950's era physical plant with space beyond our congregation's needs, we negotiated rental agreements this past year with two outside organizations. Now both the Unity Church congregation and Verb Ballets are our tenants, but even more importantly our neighbors. Both have provided new energy and life in this building as well as allowing us to reduce a significant amount of the red ink in our budget. Having these tenants has also provided us with collateral benefits as it lifted our visibility and garnered the attention and even the esteem of the greater community.

Let me thank you for just how gracefully you the people of Christ Church, have accommodated the loss of some of our space and welcomed our new neighbors. Last year I asked for your patience and to not let some of the little pinches that these two moves would entail annoy you as we moved forward with Unity and Verb. You did better than that; you helped make the entire project seem seamless and almost problem free. Having Verb and Unity move in with us is an object lesson about just how rewarding and life-giving choosing the road less travelled can be.

Kudos to Mark Biggerman, Crystal Turner, Katie Ong-Landini, Graham Lanz and Lynn Winkelman who worked tirelessly to negotiate all the legal documents, building and fire code requirements and the clearing out of our space so Verb and Unity could move in under our roof.

Another area where our parish has moved assertively down the road less traveled is to begin to address our aging building and to examine closely our facilities needs as a congregation for the next fifty years. We began that process several years ago with the Long Range Planning Committee which led to the Vestry engaging the services of the highly respected architectural firm URS to do an in-depth study of every component of our physical plant and to translate our current and anticipated future needs into architectural drawings, specs and cost estimates. We now have a Special Building Project Committee looking into what are the most essential

mechanical and structural needs of the building with an eye on those things that will result in energy cost savings, make us a more environmentally green facility, make the building more user friendly and help us reduce expensive capital repairs in the future.

In an age when many churches are not open to even the suggestion of how they can be using their buildings in creative new ways, bringing in tenants, conserving limited resources and being environmentally sustainable, we have done that and we have done it well.

In an age when many parishes are stricken with myopic leadership who are unable or unwilling to address the burgeoning issues associated with aging buildings, out-dated mechanical systems and inhospitable structures, Christ Church leadership has taken the lead in examining these issues and seeking remedies, thereby ensuring that we will have a plan to meet the future.

Once the Special Building Project Committee reports its recommendations to the Vestry a decision will need to be made on just how we are to move forward. What is clear is that we are not a congregation that can sustain the entire estimated costs of doing all the architectural report recommends at one time. It is more likely that a phased project over a fair number of years will be the appropriate way forward for us. However, if the Vestry and the parish concur that we should begin to address the most critical needs of our physical plant, a capital campaign will be necessary. Please know that before a capital campaign is decided upon that the opinions of the members of the congregation will be solicited and taken into account before that decision is made.

Another area that Christ Church has engaged the Great Emergence well is in discerning those things that create the fertile soil to birth new life as the old way of life dies. Study after study and poll after poll show that there are several critical areas that create that soil to bring new life to a church: it must proactively live the life of the Gospel imperative to serve the neediest – in other word, walk the talk; it must reach beyond it's walls into the greater community to engage in that outreach; it must welcome children and youth as valued and full members of the Body of Christ; it must have good quality worship, music and preaching that convey the values of the faith and inspire people; and it must be authentically welcoming of all God's people regardless of who they are.

In November I asked the Vestry to take a brief survey to help me discern how I need to move forward as the spiritual leader of the congregation. One of the questions on that survey was to have the respondent list the three most important things they believed we offered at Christ Church that make for a good community of faith. Out of a dozen people participating here are some of the responses to that survey.

- Eleven people noted in various ways our Outreach programs using words like varied, compassionate, and rewarding and caring.
- All twelve spoke of our beautiful liturgy, traditional services, excellent and varied music, and meaningful and vibrant preaching.

- All twelve mentioned and praised in one way or another, our Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and youth formation programs. One was glad that we “welcomed and supported children” in our community life.
- Eight noted things like the presence of God in the diversity of the congregation, our inclusiveness, the feeling of belonging, and the acceptance of divergent groups.

While the Vestry survey only reflected the views of twelve people, they are twelve of the key lay leaders of the parish and therefore I believe their responses to be a bell weather of the congregation. Certainly anecdotal evidence and my own observations indicate that the replies are accurate. What the survey tells us is that we are going in the right direction as we till the vineyard and plant the seeds in it. The growth – as scripture reminds us – is up to God.

Growth is difficult to measure in a religious community. More and more I come to believe that authentic growth is what occurs in the spiritual lives of the faithful. That is an area that we can never pay too much attention to in the Church. And offering programming and opportunities for spiritual growth has been a trajectory we have been on for a while at Christ Church and one that I hope to grow as we encounter the Great Emergence.

This past year some of the offerings for spiritual growth we added to our regular programs included our first parish retreat in Advent, the pilgrimage to Israel and expanding Lenten and Advent study and prayer opportunities to on-line formats.

This year we will continue with the Lent and Advent on-line daily reflections that will now include the writings and voices of lay people as well as clergy. We also have a new one-day Lent retreat planned as well as the Advent overnight retreat. This Lent we will continue to build on last year’s success with our Wednesday evening Adult Lenten Study program with St. Paul’s in Cleveland Heights. Sorry no pilgrimage this year. Frankly, I am still processing and, yes, recovering from the amazing Israel experience. But there is some talk about a parish pilgrimage going to Turkey, or Turkey and Greece in a couple of years and tracing St. Paul’s foot steps. Stay tuned!

For those of you who still primarily measure growth in numbers – and I still do that as well – here are two statistics reported on the Parochial Report that give us some indication of growth. The first is Average Sunday Attendance or ASA. In 2010 Christ Church reported an ASA of 124. In 2011 we will report an ASA of 129 or five more than the previous year. This represents just under a 4% growth in the number of people that attend church each Sunday. I should note that this number is a bit deceiving because it doesn’t take into account that in 2010 we had the third Saturday evening service in the mix. As the majority of attendees at the Saturday service reappeared for worship on Sunday morning there was some double counting taking place. (BTW This is legal in determining the ASA.) Reconfiguring the 2011 count with this in mind I would say that the actual increase we have experienced in ASA is closer to twelve not five people, which is a 9.6% increase.

By any measure this is terrific in an age when ASA's are declining.

The second number that indicates some growth is in pledge and plate income. With the final tally of the 2012 pledge campaign almost done we are projecting an increase in pledges over 2011 of 8-10%. This is the sixth consecutive year of growth in our pledge income which itself is somewhat of a minor miracle considering the economic instability we have experienced in our nation during that time.

Open plate collections too have far exceeded our projections. In 2011 we collected \$32,652 in open plate monies versus a budgeted figure of \$19,000. This is a whopping 72% increase!

The increased growth in pledge and plate combined with the rental income we now receive from our two new tenants, as well as the continued good fiscal management of our budget means that in 2012 we project a budgeted drawdown of \$97,000 from the principle of the White Spire Fund. While this is still an enormous amount of principle to drawdown to balance our operating budget, it is the smallest amount we have required from the WSF in many years. We are not where we need to be – which is ideally zero drawdown of the WSF principle – but we are clearly headed in the right direction. I see these numbers as clear indications of how we are correctly discerning God's call to us as a community of faith. And while we have had our missteps on occasion we also are open to re-examining how we have wrongly heard the call and re-calibrating ourselves. This is a sign of health and maturity that any congregation should be proud of.

Let me take a moment to address those folks who have not renewed their pledge yet, or who have never pledged, or who do not understand the importance of pledging, or even a few people who may be withholding because of how the life of this parish is unfolding. Please prayerfully consider making a financial commitment by pledging to the parish. As you pray on my request please see how active and thriving a community we are and reflect on the great promise we have for the future if we are faithful in giving of our time, talent and treasure. Please reflect on Jesus telling us that our real treasure is to be vested in the things of heaven and that build up God's reign and not the things of earth.

Do me a favor; talk to someone who does pledge and understands how critical it is to the life of the parish to be able to count on your financial support. Reflect on the progress we have made in the past six years at Christ Church and just how God is at work among us. Pray on how your support will propel us even further in the direction of a healthy, balanced budget and more secure ministries. In your prayers and reflections please take into account that every time you or a member of your family comes here that the lights are on, there is heat in the winter, the parking lots are plowed, the lawns are mowed and the grounds look lovely, the insurance is paid, there is running water, there is good music and liturgy, your children are being formed in the Christian faith, there are numerous opportunities for you to grow in your own faith, the staff are paid, the hungry are being fed, the naked clothed, the bereaved comforted, there is a priest who preaches and provides you with pastoral care — the list of what we provide is

endless. All of this is there for you and all of it costs money. Please make a financial pledge to this parish to sustain our common life and continue to allow us to thrive.

Let me observe that from a purely financial viewpoint we get a lot of the proverbial “bang for the buck” at this parish. Ours is a pretty lean, if not austere budget. I think I can say without hesitation that what is offered on the banquet table of Christ Church is hardly lean or austere meal, but rather an abundant and rich feast. Let’s not loose what we have.

Having said all this, one doesn’t need parochial report statistics to see the growth in the congregation. It is pretty self-evident. There are ever increasing numbers of new faces in the pews and certainly no shortage of babies and young children at Christ Church. We received and confirmed eleven new people this year. We baptized eight babies and children, and seven new people transferred their membership into Christ Church from other parishes.

I also know that rich spiritual relationships with God and with each other continue to be nurtured and grown in this community. As I stated earlier this spiritual growth is the most important growth of all in a Christian community. All of this is indicative that the good news of this place is seeping out into the greater community and God is giving good and healthy growth on the vine.

I do not want to get into a lengthy litany of names of people who I am thankful for in this year’s report. The truth is I am thankful that God has given all of you to me to be fellow sojourners on this journey of faith we are on. Plus it is risky business to name too many folks because invariably someone feels left out and that hurts. So let me offer my thanks to all of you who have in ways great and small been active in building up God’s reign in this place during this past year. *(Have people stand.)*

Now for just a few specific words of thanks:

I want to recognize and honor Charlie Buss, Patricia Burgess, Jennifer Lanz and Greg King who are the out going class of 2012 of the Vestry. Also leaving after several years of faithful service is our Clerk, Christina Forward.

Gregg has served as a warden for two years and Patricia lead the search and oversight of URS’s work for us and has been interim Treasurer this past year. I will miss both of you and the gifts you bring to the table. Vestry service and being an officer are special ministries in the life of the parish and these people have served us well.

Many thanks also to the remaining Vestry and to Lynn Winkleman who is stepping up for an encore performance as our Senior Warden. I look forward to discerning with you the road less traveled this coming year.

My deep gratitude goes out to our two adjunct clergy, the Rev. Melanie Sunderland and Father Jim Greer. The liturgical and pastoral life of our parish is made richer by your presence among us.

To all the heads of committees and ministries and all those who serve on them, please know of my gratefulness for all you do at Christ Church.

To Leslie Swaim-Fox, our Director of Christian Education, Don Jackson, our Parish Administrator, Justin Miller, our Music Director and Harry Holliman our sexton, let me say I know more than anyone what you do to provide that incredible bang for the buck we get at Christ Church. Thank you all!

Speaking of Justin, he has recently come to a fork in the road of his journey and has chosen a new path to follow. Beginning in September he will become the organ scholar at St. Alban's Cathedral in Greater London. (That would be England and not Ohio.) Taking this position is a significant move upward in Justin's nascent career. Justin will complete his contractual obligation to us, which is through August. This is bittersweet news: We are sad that he is leaving especially after such a brief period of time, but we are also happy for him. Now, it is too early to be saying good-bye, but know that we wish you Godspeed when you embark on this new leg of your journey. Also, let me be the first to put in a reservation for a bed and breakfast stay at the cottage you will be living in on the Cathedral Close.

Some of you will recall that several weeks ago I preached a sermon titled, "Preparing the Way For The Ones Who Are Not Here Yet." The sermon found its inspiration in an article by an ELCA Lutheran Bishop named Mike Rinehart titled "Insiders and Outsiders." The essence of Bishop Rinehart's article is that "Decisions in the institutional church are [almost always] made for the benefit of those inside rather than those outside the church. In every single decision, even the little ones, insiders trump outsiders."

The reason Rinehart believes this problem is happening? "Church structures were set up to preserve what exists, not change it. These stable structures work well when society is changing slowly, imperceptibly. If something is working, protect it at all costs. But what if it is not working? What if the rate of societal change skyrockets, and old patterns and structures no longer work? Peter Drucker once said, "When the rate of change outside the organization exceeds the rate of change inside the organization, the organization is doomed."

Here is Rinehart's solution: "So here's the plan. New policy. Every decision, every single decision made by staff, council [Vestry] and every committee is made on behalf of those not yet here. Every sermon choice, every hymn, song and musical choice, every building and grounds choice, every spending choice is made with outsiders in mind."

"When we become a church for the world, the outsider, when the pain of staying the same (and dying of irrelevance) for those already here exceeds the pain of changing (and sacrificing old

ways) for those not yet here, we will be the church for which God incarnate came to this earth and gave his life.”

Rinehart concludes by saying, “That’s it. That’s all I’ve got. If I’m wrong, fire me now. I’ll die on this hill.”

I concluded that sermon by aligning myself with Bishop Rinehart. I too will die on this hill of being a community of faith that makes all its decisions based on the one’s who are not here at Christ Church yet.

So based on that, here is my vision for Christ Episcopal Church in Shaker Heights, Ohio. I want us to be a community of followers of Jesus whose every decision is made on behalf of the one’s who are not here yet. I want us to continue to put our hearts, minds and souls into being a church for the world, the outsider, for children, for the rejected, the lonely and all those people who have not found a spiritual home anywhere else. I want us to stand at the fork in the road that Christianity stands at today and see there are two roads before us with two very divergent paths. One road calls us to stay the course of the old way of being Church. This road beckons us to keep saying whenever we are challenged by something new, “but we have never done it that way before.” This road asks us to be ostriches and bury our heads in the sand so we can deny that the tectonic shifts beneath our feet are even happening. Frankly the destination that road will bring us to is of our dying of total irrelevance.

The other road leads us to making all our community decisions for those who are not here yet. It is the path that leads us to embracing all the children of God and trying new ways of proclaiming the Good News. It is the path of taking risks, of doing new things and in new ways, so that we might be a part of the exciting new creation that God is birthing. Ultimately this is the path of following Jesus.

This path calls us to sacrifice old ways so we can be the church for which God incarnate came to this earth and gave his life. This is the path of the road less traveled. And if we choose to follow it, it is the road that will make all the difference.

Thank you.