

**State of the Parish Address: 2010 Annual Meeting**

**The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector**

**Sunday, January 24, 2010**

The Articles of Incorporation of Christ Episcopal Church of Shaker Heights, Ohio states that “the Corporation is organized and shall be operated for public religious and charitable purposes. The Corporation may engage in the following activities in carrying out its charitable purposes. . .” The second item then listed in the Articles as one of the activities this parish may engage in is, “promoting the interests of the Christian religion.”

Now that may seem like a boiler plate purpose for a corporation that is engaged in the business of being a church: a no-brainer, so-to-speak. It is also a very broad purpose; I suspect left intentionally so by the writers of the document. No point in painting yourself into a corner with too a narrow definition,

But that statement does beg a question: Just which interpretation of the Christian religion does this particular parish promote? What Christian interests do we desire to promote in the many communities that we live in and serve?

Certainly you and I are not interested in promoting the interests of the Christian religion as Pat Robertson understands them. Nor would we be interested in promoting many of the interests of the Christian faith that are promoted by, say, Benedict XVI.

And truthfully, we are also not in alignment with the interests of Christianity that is always promoted by many other Anglicans around the worldwide Communion.

While our beliefs and practices at Christ Episcopal Church are clearly Anglican/Episcopal and sit squarely on the three-legged Anglican stool of scripture, tradition and reason, the Christianity that we preach and practice - those interests - here are unique, made so by the diverse, delightful, and often times peculiar constituency of this congregation. In ministry, outreach, worship, formation and theological expression we are a distinctive congregation with specific interests. And I would add, blessedly so.

Notice that I said the Christianity that we practice, not the Christianity that we promote. After three and a half years serving as your priest and spiritual leader, I have come to understand that the number one problem in this parish, our biggest hurdle, our Achilles' heel, our weakest link, is our abject failure to share with others the good news of this place. Like most other Episcopalians, we are terrible at “promoting the interests of the Christian religion” as they are understood and lived out here at Christ Church.

And the amazing - or better put sad - thing about that is the Christian religion that is promoted at Christ Episcopal Church in Shaker Heights is an incredible gift that we have to offer the communities we serve.

Episcopalians tend to shirk their shoulders when they are told of this failure to share the good news with others. “It’s written on our hard drives” they respond with a sheepish smile. As if that statement explained everything and let’s them off the hook from doing anything about it. Well, who wrote that hard drive? I want to know. Surely God did not write it. I do not know of one model of Christian that God has made that has a “do not share the good news with anyone” clause written on its hard drive.

We need a new hard drive, which means we need a new server. The current server seems to think that being a faithful Christian is a private, secretive endeavor. We need a server that directs us to proclaim the good news of this parish with joy in all of life; which means we need to serve Jesus Christ.

Last week at the Inquirers' Class, I asked the participants what did they look for and desire in a Church community and what draws them to this particular parish?

The responses included these; acceptance of who I am as a person, commonality of interest, hospitality, a spiritual place, friendly, love for all people, welcoming of children, diversity, educational opportunities, the celebration and love of the Holy Eucharist. These are all crucial Gospel-based components of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. And they happen here!

You know and I know that there are people who would love to be a part of a faith community that understands Jesus Christ as we do. But they don't know about us! We hold it as a well kept secret. They don't know about it because we don't tell them. So what

the majority of un-churched and de-churched people are left to believe is that Christianity is actually all about what Pat Robertson or Benedict XVI says it is. It becomes the default position. Can you blame them? And so they don't look further. "If that is Christianity," they think, "I want no part of it."

And that becomes not only a failure on our parts to live into the Articles of Incorporation; it is a failure to live into the Gospel. "Go therefore and make disciples," Jesus instructs us. Go promote the interests of the Christian religion as they are practiced at Christ Church, Shaker Heights and bring good news to a people who sit in darkness.

Nothing short of doing this will allow us to overcome the other obstacles we face in our life together. I am not going to revisit those obstacles today, they were unambiguously laid out in my, "Awake Christ Church, Arise" sermon on November 15th of last year. If you missed that sermon it is posted on our website; please read it! And let me engage in some blatant self-promotion here; if you did hear that sermon it is definitely worth re-reading. Please re-read it!

The point is this: the only thing for us to do to move into the future and grow this place so that we can continue to be a viable congregation is to share the good news of what happens in this parish. Don't look for some program, or a motivational speaker, or the clergy, or a book on evangelism to be the panacea that will solve the issues we face. I will tell you that if reading books, listening to motivational speakers, clergy efforts and providing programs were the solution to church growth, the Episcopal Church would be the biggest Church in the world. We provide a profusion of those things. While all of them are valuable instruments, they are not the end all. Ultimately it comes down to you and me. The one we are looking for to make the difference in our life is us!

Here is a piece by one of my favorite poets, Mary Oliver. It is titled "What I Have Learned So Far."

"Meditation is old and honorable, so why should I  
not sit, every morning of my life, on the hillside,  
looking into the shining world? Because, properly  
attended to, delight, as well as havoc, is suggestion.

Can one be passionate about the just, the ideal, the sublime,  
and the holy, and yet commit to no labor in its cause?

I don't think so.

All summations have a beginning, all effect has a  
story, all kindness begins with the sown seed.

Thought buds toward radiance. The gospel of  
light is the crossroads of – indolence, or action.

Be ignited, or be gone."

My vision for Christ Church is that each of us becomes ignited with the good news of this place so that we will never have to face being gone. That we ignite others in new exciting ways; not just with parades or our Farmer's Market booth or Serving Shaker: Faith in Action and the other various ways we make ourselves public. Rather I want us to ignite ourselves and others with our personal witness. And when I say this I don't mean for us to knock on doors, or stand in shopping plazas handing out pamphlets, or cornering people at work and in our families, becoming obnoxious, while hammering them with a message of salvation or damnation. That is clearly not who we are.

The place to start being ignited is with prayer. So I want us to begin to develop a discipline of prayer: to pray each and every day that God guide us as to how we can share what we have in this place. I want us to pray to God every day that we are given the confidence and the words we need to do this. I want us to be fervent in prayer asking that God grow this place as we do God's work here in a unique and holy way. More than anything else, we need to utilize this ancient Christian practice; the power of prayer is the spark that will ignite us and set us on fire.

To that end the Church Health Team lead by Hilary Mason-King, will focus on our prayer life in the coming year. And they

will offer a number of opportunities and ideas to explore various forms of prayer and thereby enrich our individual and common life. Please speak to Hilary and the members of the Health team and support them in this important effort.

In addition our Adult Lenten program this year – titled “Teach Us To Pray” – will give us the knowledge and the tools to pray more confidently and in all of life. Christ Church people need to be a people of prayer - a people who are passionate about the just, the ideal, the sublime, and the holy.

On Saturday, February 6th we will inaugurate a new service at 5:30 pm each week. This service will be offered on a trial basis for four months through the month of May. If we find it to be successful we will make it a permanent part of our worship schedule. The Saturday service will be a third major opportunity for worship that we offer on the weekend. Based on the worship style of the Emergent Church movement taking place in Western Christianity, this service is being billed as, “a contemporary worship service of music, prayer, scripture, reflection, bread and wine.” ***“A place to worship Jesus and not idolize him.”***

The worship style will be very informal and its aim will be to be accessible to those people who have either no concept of what church is about, or a negative concept based on bad experiences or the off-putting exposure they have received through the media. It is meant for those who simply would not be comfortable with the liturgies we offer on Sunday morning.

Based on what I have read, observed in other places and come to believe after several years of prayer, this is a style of worship we need to pursue. I am very excited about this trial run, even though it means a significant added commitment on our part. This service also has the potential to be a valuable vehicle, whereby we can share the good news with many people who sit in darkness and hopefully grow this congregation.

For the record, please note that if the primary result of this service is just to move people from Sunday morning attendance to Saturday afternoon attendance, we will not continue it. The demands of planning and executing an additional liturgy will be such as to not warrant just moving pieces around on the game board. Now I will say, if we see some folks who find it convenient to occasionally come on Saturday because they have conflicts on a Sunday morning, great! They of course will be welcome. Better to come on Saturday than not at all. And of course, those faithful members of the parish who are curious as to what this service is all about are also more than welcome to experience something new.

But, but, but, this service will not be successful without you and your active participation in promoting it. So I am asking that you share our introduction of this service with others. Invite to come and see and try something new. Tell them that this will be different from all their preconceived notions about Christianity and worship. Take the ad in today’s bulletin and give it to someone. Email them the link to our website; information on the service is on the home page. Tell them to open the *Sun Press* and see our ad in this past Thursday’s edition. It will also be printed in that newspaper for the next few weeks as well. And most critically pray for the confidence to extend the hand of invitation and hospitality to others. Pray and work for the success of this service.

Let me offer kudos to a number of people who have served Christ Church faithfully.

The four members of the Vestry rotating off of that Board today are Lisa Fletcher, Byrdie Lee, Charles Griffith and David Goward. Thank you to all four people for your service to this parish. I am grateful for your companionship and being able to work together to build up the kingdom. I am especially grateful to Byrdie and David for stepping up and filling two unexpired vestry terms when people moved or when personal circumstances changed, making it no longer possible for them to continue their vestry service.

I am also grateful that Charles was finally given the opportunity to serve a term on the Vestry after a long and accomplished membership at Christ Church. You did good, friend!

It is just not possible for me to fully express the incredible service of Lisa Fletcher to this church. For the past two years, Lisa has served tirelessly as our Junior Warden with her focus being on building and grounds. This is the job no one ever wants in the church, yet Lisa tackled the task of taking good care of this property with aplomb. In addition to that she has spearheaded our new Community Meal Ministry, the establishment of the new Community Garden, heads up the Newcomers ministry and maintains the

informative and always creative bulletin board in the Great Hall. Lisa seems to draw on a well of energy that is inexhaustible. How she does all she does while raising a family is beyond me, other than to say that the Spirit is powerfully at work in her. Thank you, thank you, Lisa. I am so grateful for all you have done and your companionship. But know this; you have my blessings to rest and relax until September before we find new ways to use your extraordinary gifts in new ways.

Our senior Warden Katie Ong-Landini is not retiring from Vestry yet. She has one more term to go and that will be used to serve a second year as our Senior Warden. Personally, it may not be in accordance with the By-Laws or Canons, but as far as I am concerned Katie could be anointed Warden for Life at Christ Church! She has fulfilled the role of Senior Warden as well as anyone I have ever known. Katie has devoted herself fully to the task of being an effective, energetic, faithful and beloved lay leader of this parish. Her gifts are seemingly boundless and she has offered them selflessly to build up the Kingdom in this place. In addition to her own busy life as a mother and volunteer, she leads the youth group, teaches Sunday School, helps with just about everything at Christ Church, is a liturgical minister and, and, and, occasionally offers her beautiful voice as a cantor in the worship service. Like Lisa, the Spirit is wonderfully at work in Katie. I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this amazing congregation with you. Thank you.

In the autumn of 2008 we constituted a Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) with the specific task of examining all the possible options that Christ Church might consider to remain a viable congregation into the future. This was done in response to the fact that even though we are experiencing healthy growth in program, membership and stewardship, the rate of that growth - specifically income growth - is not able to outpace the draw down we take from the principle of the White Spire fund. The White Spire fund is the resource that helps us balance our operating budget; a draw down which is well in excess of \$100,000 per year.

The SPC spent sixteen months at their task. This was a diligent, faithful group of Christ Church folks who did this labor of love for all of us. The SPC issued their report - it is not a plan yet - to the Vestry in December of 2009. A special meeting of the Vestry was held this past Tuesday evening, where the SPC presented their report in full. It is now in the hands of the Vestry to determine which of the options the SPC offered will be best for us to use as a goal to attain.

I am grateful for the numerous hours of meetings and research that the SPC put in. Mark Biggerman chaired the SPC and I am grateful to him and all the members for this gift they have offered the congregation. Kudos are also due to Patricia Burgess who compiled the voluminous material and made it coherent. It is an excellent document.

Our Outreach Committee under the steady hand of Lynda Bernays continues to focus this congregation on incarnating the Gospel of social justice. This year we have jumped from one to four weeks of IHN hosting, have leaped from 30 to 50 to 70 personal toiletries bags for the Homeless Stand Down, engaged in a successful new fund raiser with the Holy Coffee campaign, maintained our presence at the Shaker Square Farmer's Market, continue to provide Outreach funds by raising and giving monies for flocks of chickens and braces of bunnies to help create sustainable farming, to mosquito nets to help prevent malaria infection in Tanzania.

The Outreach Committee works to heal a broken world with minimal funding and they keep the integrity of this congregation whole as they compel us in following Jesus words of, "just as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me." Oh, yes, Lynda will also help keep you healthy by offering you wholesome vegetarian food and recipes as well as offering you hiking opportunities night and day to get you into buff shape!

It is an extraordinary blessing to now have a dedicated treasurer of the parish. We struggled with this position for a while and then Camille Ho-alim came forward and offered her exceptional gifts. For a congregation that has gotten into trouble over being inattentive to financial matters in the past, we are fortunate to have Camille over-seeing the parish funds. She is a faithful Christian bringing valuable gifts to the table.

And I also would like to recognize two people who have served with distinction overseeing parish or parish related funds. Patricia Burgess is stepping down as the chair of the White Spire Fund and John Shelley is stepping aside as the chair of the Christ Church Foundation. I am grateful to both of these fine parishioners for their wisdom, expertise and service. They have exercised due diligence in overseeing these two funds and for that we can only offer our deepest thanks.

And speaking of funds: Ed Towns who helped create the Christ Church Heritage Society two years ago continues to grow the number of those people who make commitments of a minimum of \$5,000 to Christ Church in their estate planning and wills. This past week a letter went out to people forty and over asking them to prayerfully consider doing just that as they plan the future of their resources. While these funds generally will not impact our current financial needs, they do allow us to plan for future generations so that they may continue to proclaim the good news.

It is because of Ed's work and the CCHS that our beloved Jackie Hudson who died this past May, made arrangements through CCHS to include the parish in her bequests. She lovingly left a handsome legacy to Christ Church as a part of her estate planning. And for that we give praise to God.

Special kudos to Martha Ray and Lisa Fletcher for taking complete ownership of the new Community Meal as the leaders of teams Mary and Martha. My thanks to all the volunteers as well. If you had told me last year the Community Meal would have gelled as a ministry as quickly as it did, I would have doubted you. But it has done so and more. This has been an extraordinary new outreach ministry at this parish and I am sure, grow even better this year.

My deep thanks to Greg King for taking his passion for Education for Ministry and making it happen here. He is facilitating a group of eight eager students hungry to know more about their faith. I know EFM will see more growth in this Christian formation program this year and be a vital component of adult formation.

We have an outstanding staff at this parish who continue to do much with a little; a loaves and fishes act if you will.

Leslie Swaim-Fox, our Director of Christian Formation is one of the jewels in our crown. I could wax eloquent for hours about her. Just know that so much of our growth in young family's is due to Leslie and Catechesis program. My thanks to her excellent staff of teachers as well.

Nathan Carterette continues to lead our music program. Under his direction the choir grows ever better each week. He continues to explore new styles of music to incorporate into our worship thereby providing us with more diversity and new energy. Our Concerts at the Crossroads program still strives to make Christ Church a dynamic center in Cleveland for the performing musical arts.

Don Jackson wears a number of hats in his role of parish administrator. He is the first voice of Christ Church and the first face you meet when you walk in the door Monday-Friday. He and a dedicated group of volunteers keep a busy parish office moving along pretty smoothly.

Harry Holliman continues to serve as our sexton and general all around guy Friday. His effervescent spirit adds enormously to our common life.

And while not on staff, our diaconal intern Josh Butler has been a welcome addition to the parish this year. As I get to know Josh better I am convinced that the Episcopal Church will be enriched beyond measure by Josh's tremendous gifts and passion for justice, as he prepares for ordained ministry.

I know that there are some folks and ministries that I have overlooked. Know that this is not intentional, but this State of the Parish Address can only be so long; the television networks only give us so much air time these days. To those not mentioned please know in your hearts that I hold you all dear and am deeply grateful for all that you do, things big and small, to make this the incredible community of God's people what it is.

This is my fourth year of being with you and the first year of my being your rector; so far I am loving it all and loving you. Thank you for opportunity and the blessings.

In her sermon at my institution this past September, the Rev. Cathie Caimano - aka Father Cathie - ended her sermon by saying this. "Together, who KNOWS what you [the congregation and I, Peter] will discover together in the Kingdom of God." Let's fasten our seatbelts and enjoy this amazing journey of faith that our Savior Jesus Christ has us on. Let's go discover what God has in store for us in that glorious Kingdom!

Thank you.