

2022 Rector's Oral Report

- If 2020 was “a year like no other,” 2021 is a close second.
- it seems like everything has changed, and nothing has changed. We're back doing worship exclusively on Zoom, for another couple of weeks; holding this meeting in an online-only format for a second time; and limiting in-person interactions with each other.
- Despite the hard work done by the scientific and medical communities to understand how this virus works, to get vaccines made, tested, mass-produced, and administered, it feels like there is no end to our collective pandemic suffering. And yes, I'm using that term very deliberately: we are in the middle of a long, slow-rolling, worldwide trauma, marked by disconnection and uncertainty; anxiety over what will happen to us and/or our families if we get the virus; the deliberate spreading of disinformation; people taking out their frustrations on store clerks and nurses; and the existential crisis of having to face the truth that we do not have as much control over our lives as we think we do. None of us has been left unscathed. And it's going to take time and a continuation of our deliberate efforts to care for one another to get through these next stages of the pandemic.
- 2021, by the numbers:
 - Sunday attendance has held steady, both for in-person services and those offered exclusively online. Evening Prayer during Advent and Lent in particular saw a rise in participation on those days when it was offered in a hybrid or virtual format.
 - One person joined the Body of Christ through baptism
 - Bishop Shannon formally received one person into the Episcopal Church.
 - One marriage was solemnized.
 - Seven of God's saints were buried from St. James.
- 2021 also saw a number of COVID-related changes, some visible and some not:
 - An enhanced air filtration system was installed in the existing ductwork, along with a new thermostat for the nave, to help ensure the air handlers are able to run independently, as part of our mitigation strategy for the building last June.
 - We received a grant from the diocese which allowed us to purchase and install new microphones, a mixer board, and a dedicated computer for the nave, which has allowed us greater “reach” in live-streaming worship services and other events.
 - We've made good use of outdoor spaces like the Memorial Garden and the front porch area facing the Green when weather permits.
 - We adjusted some of our worship-related practices, including requiring masks, limiting in-person attendance, and not using the altar rail
 - Patience and cooperation from everyone have been the key ingredients to making all this work. We've done really well at this so far. Remarkably, we are not aware of *any* church event, here or across the diocese, which has resulted in spreading the virus. Let's keep it up!

- “Rector’s Shout Outs”:
 - Karen Vitols, treasurer, supported by Sally Garmon, Laura Kent, and the Finance Team, for heroic and often invisible work to manage our financial resources
 - the “in-house” Covid response team of Sally Garmon, Barbara Johnson, Sari White, Candace Vandouris, Jim Lorenz, and Fiona McElwain for their wisdom and guidance in navigating the reopening procedures and making hard decisions on behalf of the community;
 - Jim Lorenz, and the St. James choir, for continuing to share their musical gifts under a difficult and ever-evolving set of circumstances;
 - Sebastian Lorenz, for his technical assistance and willingness to learn a slightly complicated system very quickly;
 - Candace Vandouris, for her diligence in ensuring that there are always enough readers and ushers to support Sunday services;
 - Tim Sink, for his willing contribution of his graphic design skills and communications expertise;
 - Diana Beattie, for the hours of hard work she put in, often without help, to restore the planters on the Church St. side of the building and along the front of the rectory to a proper fragrant glory;
 - The “Three Amigos”: David Sleeper, Sherman Kent, and Knox Johnson, for their work in getting the filtration system installed, and in continuing to suggest ways to use energy more efficiently;
 - Fiona McElwain, our junior warden, for her assistance in ensuring pastoral care needs throughout the community are met, and
 - Barbara Johnson, the outgoing senior warden. Her term has been marked by both a clergy transition and the pandemic, both of which have necessitated far more time and effort than would be usual for the role. St. James owes her a debt of gratitude for clear-headed leadership through this difficult time. I hope we will have the chance in the near future to thank her properly in person.
- What’s next?
 - In the very near future: Lent and Easter will hopefully look closer to “normal” than they have. That includes a return to in-person worship in mid-February, and participating in an Easter Vigil service with some of our neighboring churches over at Mission Farm. Details will follow soon.
 - The work begun in 2021 continues. The 3 questions I posed at this meeting last year – what challenges do we face? What has changed about how we do ministry? What opportunities are present, and how can we capitalize on them? – are still very much live issues. The new “Growth Team” spearheaded by Bill Corson has made some headway on the 3rd of these questions, both in terms of small things we can do right now, and of bigger goals to strive for as we come out of the pandemic. You’ll be hearing more about that in concrete terms later this year, once the vestry has had time to take the team’s initial brainstormings and translate them into manageable, concrete work plans and goals.

- Our finances are stable, as you will hear about from Karen in a few minutes. However, one of the large pledges which has sustained our budget for the past 3 years expires after this calendar year. Toward that end, stewardship is something we will have to discuss very seriously in the very near term. The bottom line is, our pledge income needs to increase substantially over the next 2-3 years if we want to continue to operate as we are used to. I know it's an uncomfortable subject – let's face it, money isn't exactly considered a topic for polite conversation - but the reality is, we need to talk about it so we can figure out as a community what to do about it. We will be successful at it IF, and only if, we're willing to lean into that uncomfortable place, ask the hard questions about what God is asking of us, and be willing to work with the answers even if they're not what we expect them to be.
- All of these items fit within what Bishop Sean Rowe, in his address to diocesan convention this past fall, called a circular process of observation, interpretation, and intervention. It's based in discernment around what God is actually calling us to do, and its desired outcome is the vision of God's kingdom manifest right here, within these walls and as we go forth from their safety. Tough conversations are necessarily a part of the process, as is willing to be stuck in one of the 3 phases for a while. This is not a technical challenge where the "right" program will fix it. It's more of an existential one, tied up in questions of who we are and how we can best serve God in this time of constant change.
- None of this is happening in a vacuum. As you may have read, our diocese is in the process of discerning how it might reorganize and streamline operations to be able to continue to support the Church's mission effectively. The work of that team will be completed later this year. While we don't yet know what the recommendations will contain, the one thing which is absolutely clear across the entire Episcopal Church is the need to collaborate with one another. We can't go it alone, which is why maintaining connections with our neighboring churches and the diocese is vitally important. Believe it or not, St. James is well-positioned to be the "resource parish" in this area, by virtue of our size as well as the enormous wealth of talent available for sharing. Collaboration is, in some ways, a MASSIVE cultural shift – one that's kind of scary, given our history of insisting we can go it alone just fine because we've always done it that way. As with the conversations around stewardship and setting the course of this parish for the next few years, it might feel a little uncomfortable – but, the more we take advantage of opportunities to learn, to worship, and to work together with other Episcopalians and our bishop, the easier it will be for all of us.
- 2022 feels like staring into a void... but Romans 8 tells us we have nothing to be afraid of:
 - What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any

charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.