

Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, Bluemont VA – Meeting Notes

Subject: Virtual Vestry Meeting with the Rev. Canon Mary Thorpe

Date: Sunday, August 30, 2020

Attendees: Mary Thorpe, Linda Bailey, Lois Tapscott, Tim Hall, Cindy Ingram, Josette Keelor, Richard Purnell, Judy Hall

Mary Thorpe hosted the after church meeting on Zoom, beginning at about noon. We chatted for a while with formal discussions delayed until we could get Richard, who was having internet issues, connected via Tim's phone. After we were all on, Mary opened us in prayer.

Mary said that she was glad to be able to meet with us and stated that she had already been in conversation with Linda Bailey, the Rev. Sarah Brockenbrough, and the bishops concerning Good Shepherd. She also said that she had looked at the numbers, which have stayed fairly consistent both in finances and attendance. She said the purpose of this meeting was to give info and to listen. Mary said that in today's environment of consumer choices locality is not as important as mission. Mary then asked the vestry about what made Good Shepherd a choice for them.

- Josette – Although within walking distance to Grace in Berryville, she comes to GS because of the small church atmosphere where there is more opportunity for personal growth and participation. She gave the example of her involvement with the music at GS as music director. She also stated that she enjoyed singing with the combined choir (Millwood, GS, Grace) for the Palm Sunday and Easter service recordings (as a point about alternatives she is willing to forgo to choose GS.) She added that she enjoyed a setting in which she could be a speaker (homily) and service leader.
- Cindy - Stated that she enjoyed the mission activity, especially the Blessing of the Animals and food bank drive GS has with Fish. Cindy also stated that she would be interested in joining the Clarke Parish if Good Shepherd could continue with at least twice a month services and special activities, i.e. weekly AA meeting. Perhaps the building could also be used for other Clarke Parish activities such as seminars and the like. Renting out the sanctuary to other denominations like the Celtics could be another option to help offset the cost of maintenance. In short, becoming a part of a larger Parish but maintaining our identity as a Mountain church would be ideal in her view.
- Tim - Stated that we get positive feedback from many of our special events, such as Bishop visits, the services with Michael Sie, and Blessing of the Animals.
- Richard - Stated that he came to GS from St. Peter's when Chris Cunningham was at GS. He liked that everyone was involved in just the Church. There was no pressure to sign up for extra duties each year.

Judy expressed her frustration with the Diocese transition procedure. How we did not receive responses to phone calls or emails. It was especially frustrating when we submitted our self-study answers from our congregational meeting and our discernment report in February 2020 and have gotten no response. It was only after searching the Diocese website that we found that GS had been listed as in search for a long-term supply priest. Asked what is the definition of a long-term supply priest.

Mary explained that a long-term supply priest is a contract with a supply priest for a specific length of time on which specific services will be provided at an agreed hourly rate. Mary said that we were doing a disservice to Ralph by having him to continue with us as we tried to identify another priest. But we stated that Ralph was fully aware of what we were doing and has even offered us advice on our effort.

Richard stated that he thought we just need some more full-time congregants.

Mary offered that \$100,000 is needed for a full-time priest that is for a relatively new one and is probably a low estimate. We said we don't have any misconception about being able to afford a full-time priest, that's why we're trying to find ways to make a part-time and/or shared (but with some level of dedication to GS) work.

Linda said that the CCM had been meeting about mission church budget requests for 2021 and that most will be decreased. This is not a CCM issue only, but is across the board for the Diocese, due to reductions in donations due to COVID-19. Tim asked if she had an idea of how much the reduction might be, and Linda said she thinks they will be putting us in for around \$13,500 (we had requested \$14,900 in Diocesan aid).

We followed up with questions about Christ Church Lucketts, a small church that seems to be doing okay. Linda said they have a lay pastoral leader who is trained and licensed. They have a supply priest who provides communion once a month. Mary stated that she is not sure the Diocese would agree to that approach again.

At one point during our discussion, as we thought about ways to grow our congregation, Mary said, "younger people are looking for a church that will help change the world". This is a point to keep in mind as we reflect on where we want to go as a church.

Mary stated that small rural parishes either have to learn how to grow and that it's not just a priest's job to make that happen. And the small rural parish must be prepared, if its numbers stay low, to consider that its mission may be complete.

Richard stated that he was encouraged by the small rural churches and did not feel they are a burden.

Concerning the future of Good Shepherd, Linda suggested, based on her program management background, that it would be a good idea to lay out the available options for consideration. Before doing so, Mary assured us that nothing is being decided right now. Here are the options she presented:

1. Continue as we are right now
2. Fold back under Clarke Parish
 - a. Additional questions regarding this are what would happen with the Good Shepherd building? Could it continue to be used occasionally? Would it need to be closed?
 - b. Mary said that sometimes churches, like other things, have lifespans that come to an end... leading into the third option...
3. Shut the doors, turn out the lights, and congregants go their separate ways, carrying the spirit with us elsewhere. [I guess the Diocese would then decide what to do with the building]. This is similar to what was done at Trinity Episcopal, Highland Springs.
4. Partner with another small church to share clergy
 - a. Tim asked for clarification... (1) could we share with an Episcopal church from Maryland or West Virginia (“No”), (2) share with a Lutheran church (“Yes”), would sharing an assistant with a church like Christchurch, Millwood be possible (“That’s not a small church”).

Josette offers a potential fifth option: There was also mention that there’s no precedence for small churches in our region that do well on their own. A congregation as small as ours (10 or so regular attendees) has no peers. Churches (if any?) that have broken the mold have specific qualities that have allowed them to do well and offer a niche setting. (I think the one or two examples given in the Zoom meeting turned out not to be independent churches?)

Mary said our main issue to overcome is our financial status (i.e. attendance/plate and pledge contributions) to be able to support a priest and other expenses. With enough attendance, we can probably survive. She asked us to consider what would be sustainable (in the eyes of our budget.)

To jumpstart these discussions, Josette offered that we should be thinking about “What are we doing well?” and if we are the best to provide what we do well. Will people come to us for those things, or will they find somewhere else locally/regionally that does it better/is more convenient? People need to know they’re getting something from our church. Are we good enough at what we do to attract people from Berryville, Purcellville, and beyond? I come to GS because I’m getting an atmosphere I can’t get anywhere else (i.e. mountaintop church with a small setting, close-knit congregation, opportunity to participate, and fantastic music.) What are other people looking for, and can we provide that better than anyone else?

Mary encouraged us to talk over our options as a congregation. And, after closing us in prayer, she said she would follow-up with an email outlining the things we discussed.

The meeting adjourned at about 1:30 p.m.