

Vestry Report

Tom Hale, Senior Warden

February 2008

Since the deadline for articles for publication in the January *Parish Paper*, your Vestry has held a day-long retreat on January 19, 2008 and our regular February meeting on February 12, 2008.

Your elected leaders had good reason to be optimistic about the coming year. Contributions during December may have been the most ever in a single month. The Stewardship Campaign was well organized, well executed and highly successful. Participation at all parish events has been very brisk.

Retreat - January 19, 2008

After electing Vaiden Taylor Treasurer and Larry Jones Clerk, approving the minutes of its December 11, 2007 meeting, the vestry studied and adopted the 2008 budget as recommended by the Finance Committee. A number of significant points about the parish's finances were noted. The budget was being presented in January rather than in March as has been the practice in recent years. The overall stability of the parish's activities and the fact that we had clergy leadership during the latter parts of 2007, coupled with the hard work that was evident during the Stewardship Campaign, made budgeting for 2008 much more comfortable and predictable. Fixed costs account for approximately 80% of parish expenditures, leaving only 20% as discretionary or variable expenditures. While personnel costs are a large part of the parish's expenditures, the parish is lower than the average church of our size in this category. It was anticipated, as has traditionally been the case at Ascension, that revenue would drop off during the third quarter to be made up during the fourth quarter of the year.

A highlight of the budget includes an additional assistant priest for one-half of the year. In addition, a number of well deserved salary increases were included in the budget. The parish's contribution to the Diocese of East Tennessee was also increased from 11% to 12%. A copy of the budget for 2008 will be placed in the library. If you have a question about the budget or the parish's finances, please ask a knowledgeable person; don't assume the worst.

After consideration of the budget, Father Howard provided teaching concerning the considerations that are important in the parish being one that focuses on the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Some of the commonly understood societal phenomena affecting all churches were pointed out. Some were:

- church membership is declining and aging;
- membership is often static at best; people attend church by "choice" rather than by "habit" or family tradition;
- we no longer live in a Christian-centered society, thus the church-going habit is not being reinforced;
- younger people are less often satisfying their spiritual needs through church attendance; and successful churches are creatively finding ways to attract younger people by arranging church activities to fit into their lives.

A lively discussion resulted and the vestry resolved to form a new commission whose objective, in part, would be to address ways for the parish to counteract and overcome some of the trends that are negatively affecting church attendance.

The next portion of the retreat involved a review and update of goals and objectives established at the 2007 retreat. The highlights involved solidifying the Christian Formation Program for children, youth and adults with Father Howard taking the role of coordinating adult education offerings. The development and support of a Stephen Ministry Program for the parish was underway with 23 participants and six leaders having been recruited and beginning their training. A renewed commitment to revitalize the Lay Eucharistic Visitors Program is partially complete as is the offering of a contemporary worship service on intermittent Sunday afternoons to interface with youth program meetings. Finally, the resolution of the status of the building fund has been completed.

The vestry spent a large portion of their time together brainstorming about goals and areas for improvement for the parish to focus on during the coming year. The intent of the discussion was upon reaching a consensus of important areas of focus, with the details and implementation of specific strategies to be developed by the appropriate Commission.

While it was noted that all areas of the parish's life should be approached with the idea of constant improvement and enhancement, there were seven areas identified that were particularly important to the overall health of the parish. (a) In spite of the challenges involved in doing so, the consensus of the vestry was that a more dynamic and effective youth program was needed. (b) Partly the role of the new Great Commission, it was agreed that a better organized and more comprehensive way of welcoming, mentoring and integrating new members was a priority effort. The vestry members committed to individually provide leadership in helping make the atmosphere for visitors and new members more welcoming and inclusive. (c) The current efforts to reorganize and improve the parish's website were identified as important work of the Communications Commission, as well as continuing to enhance e-mail communications where possible. (d) The tradition of education at Ascension was acknowledged as very important and a commitment was made to enhance child, youth and adult education opportunities. One area of particular emphasis will be a special effort led by Tom Ladd to enhance adult educational opportunities. (e) Given the expansion of the activities in the parish, the vestry agreed that it was important to accomplish a 2007 goal of adding an assistant priest now that the parish has the financial resources. (f) Outreach was identified as an area in which we have made tremendous strides over the last couple of years and the vestry agreed that encouraging all members of Ascension to excel at some area of Outreach was important. The point was made that the portion of our budget that was devoted to Outreach really understates the broad extent of the Outreach work being undertaken by members of the parish through a number of parish ministries. (g) Finally, the idea of appointing a group to think about the vision for Church of the Ascension over the longer term and how we could collectively address some of the societal trends identified by Father Howard earlier in the day was noted. Consensus was that while we do not want to neglect people who are already here, some special thinking about programs for people who aren't here yet was needed.

The retreat concluded with a review of the purposes of the functioning Commissions in order to familiarize the new vestry members with how the Parish was organized. The Commissions include Building and Grounds, Christian Formation, Communications, Finance, Inreach/Fellowship/Parish Life, Outreach, Pastoral Care, Stewardship, Worship/Music and the Great Commission Commission. It was noted that vestry members generally were assigned a commission to monitor, and in some cases, to lead. All members were requested to submit their three top choices for assignments during 2008.

February Vestry Meeting

Highlights of the February meeting of the vestry included a general celebration of the conclusion of the Stewardship Campaign and some additional resources that have become available since the budget was adopted at the Vestry retreat. One of those opportunities was the ability to accept an offer from the Bishop to host a seminarian for the last half of the year, with the Diocese covering approximately one-half of the related costs. Father Howard announced that Knoxvilleian Brett Backus and his wife, Carla, would be joining us in August. One of Brett's areas of interest is youth. Among other relatively minor enhancements to the budget, the budget was amended to provide for the estimated salary and moving expenses for Brett.

The Commission liaisons assigned for 2008 were as follows:

Buildings and Grounds – Jim Phillips

Christian Formation – Louise Conrad (adult) and Courtney Zirkle (children and youth)

Communications – George Arrants

Finance – Rick Deaderick and Vaiden Taylor, Treasurer

Great Commission Commission – Ben Davidson and Scott Poland

Inreach – Babs Richardson, Junior Warden and Les Hargrove

Outreach – Julie Hembree

Pastoral Care – Anne Kaminsky

Stewardship – Tom Hale, Senior Warden

Worship and Music – Robin Kell

Youth – Randy Nichols

Junior Warden Babs Richardson reported on the efforts to spruce up the area just outside the library to serve as a meeting and greeting place, particularly for visitors. She also handed out vestry nametags and requested all members to wear them as part of the vestry's commitment to lead the effort to create a more welcoming, friendly, and inclusive atmosphere around the parish's activities.

Although there have been several acknowledgements and thank yous to those who planned and carried out the wide variety of events commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Church of the Ascension, enough cannot be said about what the excellent

and diligent work of this Committee has meant to many parishioners. Moreover, this work has obviously been a catalyst for improved outlook of many and has contributed to an overall increase in participation of parishioners in parish events. So, our heartfelt thanks go to *Janice Kell* and *Laura Barnes* and their committee composed of *Nancy Butler, Louise Conrad, Jack Furgurson, Jim Goble, Joy Johnson, John and Ann Nelson, Bob Parrott, Jane Phillips, Babs Richardson, John and Mary Rayson, Dave Traver, Wylene Vrba, Cathy Wadley, and Mildred Wright.*