

Report from the Vestry January 10, 2009

The vestry met in retreat at the church on January 10, 2009.

The primary agenda items included hearing an extensive report from the Visioning Task Force, considering the adoption of a budget for 2009, and receiving a report from the Search Committee recommending adoption of the Parish Profile. At the outset of the meeting, it was noted that although Father Howard was under the weather and unable to attend, everyone felt his presence in spirit.

Two representatives of the Visioning Task Force, Chris Baker, Chair, and committee member John Montuori, presented a report on behalf of the group. Baker described the process used by the committee which is made up of a very diverse group of parishioners. The work of the group required ten meetings before consensus could be reached. Baker described the objective of the group as attempting to determine and describe Ascension's personality as it would be experienced by persons looking for a church home. The essence of what the committee was seeking to ascertain was the church's vision statement.

The committee distinguished a mission statement from a vision statement by noting that the mission statement is primarily for those already involved in Ascension's work, whereas a vision statement is designed to communicate to those outside of the parish the "personality" of the parish. It was emphasized that the content of a vision statement should provide to those outside a realistic description of the characteristics one would find by attending services and activities we sponsor. The group explored a number of different avenues in developing their explanation of what makes the Church of the Ascension unique. In addition to reviewing the recently produced video tape of Ascension parishioners describing what Ascension means to them, the group designed and distributed a simple questionnaire for completion by different ministry groups within the parish. Members of the group also met with parishioners who were relatively new to the parish to explore their experiences. Finally, the group also reviewed websites created for other churches by hired consultants to see how others with professional help had approached describing their parishes. Baker stated that when the group got stuck in doing its work, Father Howard assisted them in working through their differences. Following their deliberations, the group offered the following statement as a possible vision statement for the parish use:

The Episcopal Church of the Ascension is a vibrant community, diverse in personality, united in faith. Offering a middle path in a divided world, Ascension encourages individuals to pursue their understanding of God at a depth and pace that is meaningful to them. Comprised of warm, genuine people, Ascension fosters spiritual growth through a broad range of opportunities for everyone, from our children and youth to our senior citizens.

They include:

Worship services that are rich with liturgical tradition and grounded in scripture - experience

Education programs that encourage intellectual thought and discussion - learn

Service that contributes to the well being of our church family, community, and the world - give

Fellowship that is cultivated through small group ministries and social activities - share
Through Ascension's rich spiritual environment, individuals pursue their faith, encounter Christ, and collectively experience the power of the Holy Spirit.

Tag Line:

Rich in liturgy - Diverse in personality - United in faith

While the approval of this vision statement was deferred to a later time, several members of the vestry praised the group for their difficult and outstanding work. Members of the task force include Chris Baker, John Montuori, Lela Young, Laura Barnes, Jane Fowler, David Johnson, Bill Niemeyer, Ann Hansen, and Stuart Henderson.

In the coming weeks the vestry will consider "next steps" in the process of utilizing the committee's work.

The next order of business was to hear the report from the Finance Committee. Vaiden Taylor explained the 2008 year end results, reporting that the parish was very close to collecting all expected pledge income which indicated a very small "shrinkage" of two percent for the year. All of the funds temporarily borrowed for cash flow reasons from the building fund were repaid with interest. In spite of diligent perseverance on the part of the staff and the Finance Committee, we still ended the year with a deficit of around \$26,000 which is also approximately two percent of budgeted revenue. This result was disappointing because of the work invested in attempting to prevent a deficit. It was noted that the unbudgeted expenses causing the deficit included additional nursery expense, needed repairs to the physical plant, and a carry-over pilgrimage expense from 2008, all of which indicate healthy activity in and around the parish.

The Finance Committee explained its plan and newly adopted procedures that will be implemented in hopes of avoiding a similar result in 2009. John Pannell on behalf of the Finance Committee presented the proposed 2009 budget for discussion. The proposed budget included the following overall components:

Pledged income (\$1,045,131),
projected unpledged contributions (\$92,000),
other operating income (\$100,775),
special offering (\$11,500) and
clergy reimbursements (\$16,922),
for a total income of \$1,226,328.

Financial disbursements (\$269,104), building and grounds, including building debt service (\$196,673), children's ministries (\$45,700), parish life (\$21,200), music (\$90,175), outreach, not including special pass-through donations (\$60,249), Diocese of East Tennessee (\$125,000), missions and other outreach (\$8,620), pastoral care (\$3,000), office and communications (\$119,830), worship (\$15,600), adult ministry and Christian education (\$900), youth ministry (\$4,145), and total clergy (\$306,132), for a total expense of \$1,226,328.

The proposed budget provides for no increases in giving to the Diocese of East Tennessee and no salary increases for clergy and staff. The recommendation of the Finance Committee was that, if additional pledges were received, any excess funds should be applied to enhance our diocesan commitment and to provide clergy and staff with a cost-of-living increase in wages and salaries.

A number of issues about the proposed budget were discussed. One item of discussion related to the amount of commitment made to Outreach. This was particularly important in light of the approach taken by the Stewardship Commission in encouraging parishioners to enhance their own personal pledge commitments. Specifically, the Stewardship Commission had requested that the vestry commit to a "congregational tithe" and that commitment was advertised as part of the Stewardship Campaign. The parish administrator, Bob Wadley, pointed out that many other dollars passing through the coffers of the parish go directly to Outreach, although they are not shown under the Outreach heading in the budget. The vestry discussed developing a "narrative budget" which would more realistically show how our funds are allocated to the various missions and program areas where the parish spends its resources. It was pointed out that such a "narrative budget" served a different purpose than our traditional budget which is in reality a management tool for use in controlling expenses. Wadley also pointed out that the portion of our budget beyond fixed expenses which is available for discretionary expenditures was very small. The point made was that by the time our fixed expenses are covered there is very little money available for programs and other discretionary spending.

Following a lively discussion of the proposed budget, it was approved unanimously. The Finance Committee next made a recommendation for the restructuring of the parish's current indebtedness. It was explained that the parish operates from three separate loan commitments: the building loan, a term loan, and a line of credit originally intended for cash flow management. Because the line of credit had been used over the past few years to cover annual budget deficits, it was pointed out that we had no satisfactory way of dealing with the uneven flow of revenues that characterizes our parishioners' giving patterns. Generally our expenses are greater through the summer months than are our revenues. Thus, the parish very much needs a line of credit in order to carry us to the month of December when giving catches us up on our expenses.

The Finance Committee proposed that we roll the line of credit balance of \$100,000 into the term loan which would then be set up on an amortizing schedule to retire the term loan similar to how we are handling the building loan. This would make available borrowing capacity of the \$100,000 line of credit which we would endeavor not to use. It was pointed out by John Pannell that we could still use the money in the building fund for cash flow purposes provided that upon reimbursement we include interest on the amount borrowed. The benefit of this approach is that the building fund earns interest and the parish saves the spread between the interest actually earned by the building fund and the interest charged by the bank on the line of credit.

The committee members in attendance pointed out that the commitment was still to end 2009 without a deficit, but that we needed the borrowing capacity represented by the line of credit to avoid being without funds in the event of an emergency. Both the budget and the debt restructuring proposal were approved.

The following vestry commission assignments for 2009 were announced:
Building and Grounds - Jim Phillips and Rick Turner
Christian Formation - Louise Conrad

Communications - Bert Ackermann
Finance - John Pannell and Vaiden Taylor
Great Commission - Ben Davidson and Scott Poland
Inreach - Bert Ackermann
Outreach - Ann O'Connor and Courtney Zirkle
Pastoral Care - Julie Hembree
Worship and Music - Robin Kell
Youth - Randy Nichols and Paul Banick

The final order of business was to receive the Parish Profile that was adopted by the Search Committee at its last meeting. The completion of the Parish Profile concludes a requirement of our agreement with the Diocese of East Tennessee under guidelines governing pursuit of the priest-in-charge search alternative. Tom Ladd appeared on behalf of the Search Committee to describe the statistical methodology employed in assessing and describing the results of the Parish Survey. The survey results, as well as the Parish Profile, will be made available in the library upon becoming final. Many copies of the Parish Profile will be made available to the parish after substantial discussion of the means, methods, and results of the work of the Search Committee on the Parish Profile. The vestry approved the proposed Parish Profile with a number of very minor modifications. The next steps in the search process are (1) gain the approval of the Diocese of the Parish Profile, (2) consideration by the Search Committee of its recommendation of whether to issue a call to Father Howard to be rector, and (3) consideration by the vestry of the Search Committee's recommendation.

Tom Hale,
Senior Warden