

# THE REPORT OF THE RECTOR ON THE YEAR 2013

**The Rev. Jane Soyster Gould, Rector**

**St. Stephen's Memorial Episcopal Church, Lynn, Massachusetts**

**February 9, 2014—Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**

*Readings: Isa 58.1-9a; Ps 112.1-9; 1 Cor 2.1-12; Mt 5.13-20*

Why are we here? What does it mean to live faithfully? These questions posed by this morning's readings surely should be the questions asked of every congregation as we approach our Annual Meeting. Why are we here? And what does it mean to live faithfully?

In Isaiah, we hear God calling out the people of Israel. They believe they are following all the rules, doing everything asked of them by the Law of the Lord—and they want to know why God is not rewarding them. "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" As far as they are concerned, they have kept their part of the faith bargain and God has been absent.

But God replies, "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?"

God then goes on to detail the fast that truly is acceptable, the way of living faithfully that is pleasing to God. "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them." God declares, if you do all of this, your light will shine; "Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and God will say, Here I am."

The prophet Isaiah makes clear that God cares about how we live our lives and not simply whether we come to church and say our prayers. If our lives contradict what we say we believe and the words of our prayers, our offerings... our lives fall short of what God asks.

The psalmist echoes the same themes as Isaiah. We hear that "the righteous are merciful and full of compassion; generous in lending, manage their affairs with justice, and give freely to the poor... their heart is right; they put their trust in the Lord."

And finally, Jesus declares, "You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Biblical scholar Amy Oden explains: "Those who follow Jesus don't merely sit back and receive abundant life, or simply tell others about what a great abundant life we have. Jesus is talking here about a life that makes a difference for others in the world. We are the tastiness that adds salt to lives around us. We are light that makes plain the way of justice that is

the kingdom of God. Jesus says we must be salty and lit up in order to make a difference for God in the world. Neither salt nor light exists for itself. They only fulfill their purpose when used, poured out."

So there we have it—to live faithfully means to be salty and lit up for the Gospel, to demonstrate generosity with our hearts and our coins, to show compassion, and to engage God's work of justice. Our prayers and worship exist to form and feed us—not to be the end of our faithful living. "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Certainly, the fifty plus pages of ministry reports speak to a lot of bright light shining forth from this place and a lot of people lending their own particular saltiness to the world. I encourage you all to read them so that the words and images will bless you. This morning I just want to toss out a few images of the year that highlight our faithful living.

Before leaving on sabbatical, I organized a new Pastoral Care Team. While I looked forward to an amazing and restorative 3 months of deepening my relationships with family, friends, and God, I knew we would need more active lay visitors during my time away. Luckily, I also knew that, if I could get them gathered and going, our sabbatical priest the Rev. Dr. Edward Kienzle would do a fabulous job providing them with on-going training and support. Whether taking communion to homebound and hospitalized parishioners, visiting someone who is lonely, delivering altar flowers, or gathering the first Thursday of the month with the Healing Prayer Team for prayer, conversation, and on-going formation, the Pastoral Care Team embodies the gift of Christ-like community. Another bright light evident to anyone who walks through the building on a Tuesday night is the Knitting Group; everyone knows their laughter but what folks may not realize is that the knitters form a community of teachers and learners as they share patterns and encourage those new to yarn and needles.

As always, our ministry with children, youth, and young adults offered an abundance of light and saltiness in our lives. My heart over-flowed with both sadness and joy as 23 college-age young adults gathered in our revitalized young adult—YA—ministry, and told their employment stories. They told stories of neither college nor work offering them pathways to abundant futures. Through the fall, they did most of St. Stephen's work in the Raise Up Massachusetts Campaign for increasing and indexing the minimum wage and providing workers with earned sick time; they gathered most of our 900-plus signatures of the 16,000 collected by ECCO and more than 70,000 collected by faith communities across the state. As these young people find their way into their adult futures, we are committed to journeying with them.

In the summer, I loved the awesome spectacle of scores of KIC campers and counselors in their bright pink t-shirts boarding their buses for field trips to such places as the Science Museum, Children's Museum, Zoo, a local farm, and the Constitution. But, it also was amazing to stand high on our scaffolding and see the Common filled with our KIC community and hear their happy voices rising in the center of the city.

When our teens went on mission in August to a Native American Reservation on Long Island, which had been devastated by Super Storm Sandy, we did not know what to expect. While the Diocese of Long Island kept shifting their plans for us and ultimately had our 20 teens and adults

sleeping in a trailer and showering at the Y across town, the young people of St. Stephen's Lynn and St. Paul's Lynnfield brought Christ's light to the community. Their willingness to work in the midst of heat and dirt, and their desire to listen and learn about native ways and systemic injustice wove them into the Long Island community they came to serve. Their last day on mission, the local leaders invited 6 people from the Diocese to come meet the teens from Massachusetts because, for the first time ever, a group on mission had come to build relationships and serve not just to do a service project.

Of course, the two major Vestry led endeavors of this year sort of steal the show for 2013. The first and clearly most visible was the Chancel Restoration Project. When scaffolding began to go up after Easter, we had no idea it would not come down until All Saints Day. The vision of swarming, hard-hatted workers on our roof entertained the community for months. All of us know what it means to us to see and feel no rain falling on the altar rail during nor'easters. It is amazing to know that we can welcome the Bishop for a visitation or Confirmation or Bishop Candidate Walkabouts and not worry whether the chancel will be dry. But, I hope you all also heard, as I heard, the hope our restoration work planted in the heart of our neighborhood and city. Everyone from the Lynn legislative delegation to families walking down the street commented on how great it was to see us doing the work. All of us, through our financial commitments, as well as the Restoration Committee, Sacred Places Team, and TogetherNow Leadership made this work possible; but without the dedication of Harry Jackson and Christopher Trahan, it would not have happened.

The TogetherNow Campaign and chancel roof restoration coupled with our stunningly generous Dormer Challenge, which enabled us to extend the work to the roof over the two dormers demonstrate the commitment of the people of St. Stephen's to our church and to our ministry in the city of Lynn. Our investment in our church is a bright light in the midst of a city that experiences far too much disinvestment by institutions and individuals. Through restoration work made manifest with months of 4 stories of scaffolding as well as through our participation in Lynn Open Studios and the Essex Heritage Trails and Sails Weekend, we bring hope to downtown Lynn.

As construction workers labored outside, the Vestry worked inside. Month by month, the Vestry reviewed the St. Stephen's mission statement and mission imperatives, which their predecessors had approved in 2005. Having for 5 months listened in the congregation and talked among themselves to gain a sense of what was working, what felt essential, and where opportunities existed, the Vestry gathered in July for a strategic planning retreat. Hosted by the monks of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, we enjoyed amazing food, lovely worship, and extraordinary hospitality. We traded stories of life with the Brothers and with each other. From our Diocesan consultant Sam Thayer, we figured out whether we were green hats, or red hats, or maybe blue, black, or white. We also worked and talked our way through piles of raw data to re-write our mission statement. If you haven't noticed it on the front of the bulletin each week, here it is: **St. Stephen's is an open and affirming Christian church worshipping in the Anglican tradition. Crossing lines of color, class, culture, and generation, we seek transformation of our lives and our community through Christ's Gospel of love, compassion, and justice.**

Once agreed on the mission statement, we moved on to mission imperatives. While the two-page document of mission imperatives included in the Annual Report seems daunting, it is our guide to how we deploy human, financial, and material resources over the next 7 to 10 years. The Vestry voted five mission imperatives: **Being good stewards of our resources: physical, financial and human; Deepening community connections; Forming children, youth, and young adults; Nurturing the congregation; and Strengthening our structures of communication.** Both the process and the result of the Vestry's mission review and realignment point to the faithfulness of our leaders and the vitality of our congregation. They also remind us that we are not great at setting limits or establishing reasonable expectations for ourselves. The 2013 Vestry surely has set a challenge before those we will elect today and all the people of St. Stephen's to live faithfully—that means in bright shining and salty ways—live faithfully into these mission imperatives.

Heather Collis Puro once accused me of beginning my Reports of the Rector by saying wonderful things about who we are and all we have done in the previous year to advance God's mission, and then moving on to set an agenda five years long to be accomplished in the next year. As I reflect on the mission imperatives set by our Vestry, it occurs to me that perhaps I am here because we share an expansive vision of how God wants and needs to move in and through us; we are people of salt and light. And, I am clear that the Vestry has already done my work of pointing forward to how God might challenge, inspire and use us in 2014.

Some of our work is obvious—we need to continue to build relationships and find resources to meet the Dormer Challenge and continue our restoration work. Finding 12-million-dollars to restore our church feels well beyond our reach but we have already learned that money comes dollar by dollar through relationships and through inspiring others that the building and ministry of St. Stephen's will endure for future generations.

We also discovered this year, in part due to the extra pressure of managing a major restoration project, that our finances cannot be well-managed even by a committed and generous team of volunteers. In addition to treasurer Paul Stonkus, the work of the treasurer's office has been done by Ruthanne Switzer, Heather Collis Puro, Marilyn Cloran, and Kendra Zimiroski. Heather Collis Puro has agreed to serve as Treasurer in 2014 to help restructure the Treasurer's Office so that we have the people and procedures we need to manage our finances without substantially over-burdening volunteers.

In addition, the Vestry has committed us to engaging the question of our long-term financial viability. While it is clear that St. Stephen's will continue to rely on a mixed income stream of pledge income, fund raising, endowment draw, and grant income, we need to build an infrastructure that allows us to weather changes such as shifting priorities with a new bishop, not receiving an anticipated grant, or losing an urban assistant 6 months before anticipated. While it now seems likely that the Diocese will place a new Urban Assistant at St. Stephen's this summer, Rev. Dorothea's sudden departure in January left us scrambling for sufficient clergy support. It is with great joy and relief that I share with you this morning that Father Edward has agreed to return to St. Stephen's through June leading worship two Sundays a month and providing one day a week of pastoral care. A small Diocesan grant coupled with money in our own budget will make his presence possible.

In addition, we plan to evaluate and rework our structures of communication. Intern Dan Bell launched our St. Stephen's Facebook presence last fall but now it is up to all of us to use it and "like it"; while we may never trend, we certainly can draw attention to our presence in the cybersphere as well as here on the Common. Thanks to consulting help from Dan Collis Puro and Vestry guidance from Carolyn Hoy, a new website is in the works. Paul Lenzie has done an awesome job as web manager for years and it is exciting to expand our web presence. You can find us by googling St. Stephen's Lynn-- and, with the help of lots of you, the blank spaces will be filled in. Also, we hope to expand its capacity so that it becomes more of a tool for ministry. Con Squires already is gathering short reflections written by you so that we can offer a daily Lenten meditation by email and on our website. In addition to posting newsletters on the website, also already in the works is a system to provide the newsletter through email as an electronic pdf. Your March paper mail newsletter will include a slip inviting you to sign up for St. Stephen's E-Newsletter.

The Vestry also realized that our Ministry with Children and Youth requires rebuilding and reimagining following last spring's poorly communicated schedule change for Church School, and the high school graduation of many of our Oasis leaders. Already we have several wonderful new teachers in the Church School and others are being recruited to join them. We also are exploring new initiatives and new ways of engaging this important ministry. A Choir for Children and Youth is underway. In two weeks, coordinator Juliana Davis will meet with young people and their parents, and in late March the Choir will sing for the first time. In addition, new leadership has stepped forward with Nelson Woodfork, Chris Trahan, and Dan Bell to gather our acolytes for fellowship and training. And, parents of middle schoolers are working with the clergy to get a Middle School Youth Group off the ground. New life is emerging, which naturally requires our offering our time and talent to the work.

Our Community Ministries require examination so that we might imagine where and how God is inviting us to go deeper. Our Pantry is exploring how we might become more hospitable through the physical change of providing ramp access to the downstairs as well as by offering friendly conversation, hot or cold beverages, and access to resources. Our ECCO Team requires new leaders inspired by our increased ability to raise an agenda to action. (Did you notice that everyone from the President to the Governor to the Speaker of the House is talking about minimum wage when we couldn't get it out of committee last year before our signature campaign). St. Stephen's needs leaders who want to help craft a faith agenda for the 2014 Governor's Race that focuses on jobs and wages, immigration reform, and criminal justice reform. Through both Kids in Community and some folks interested in family literacy, we are exploring how we build meaningful relationships with families in our neighborhood, and what a year 'round program for children might offer our community.

Of course, the vitality of the ministry we do depends on our nurturing the congregation. We worship, pray, study, and hang out together to deepen our relationships with one another and with God. People often ask me if church attendance is necessary to faithful living. In other words, they want to know whether our lights can shine and our saltiness make a difference in the world without our going to church. Of course the answer is yes. God can and does work miracles in and through us anywhere and everywhere. But what is evident as Paul invites the first century Corinthian community to get over its squabbles and unite in the power of God inspired by the

Holy Spirit, God created us to be in relationship; Jesus and his followers gathered people in communities of prayer, table fellowship, and service because we know God better as we live and work together.

The Vestry's goals for living into the mission imperative of Nurturing the Congregation are all about deepening our relationships with God and each other, and inviting new people to know, love and serve the Lord in the midst of this community.

We are a feisty, salty, brightly shining crew here at St. Stephen's. We need God and one another to live faithfully into the work God has given us to do. A new year is dawning and God needs each and every one of us to offer the best of love and service that the Lord requires and then God will say to us "Here I Am." And God will bless us with abundance. Amen.