

Address to the Parish  
Annual Meeting Sunday  
May 2, 2010  
The Rev. Emily Richards

My brothers and sisters, we gather this day to celebrate another year in the life of our community. I give thanks for all that we have experienced as the people of St. Peter's Church and pray that both the blessings and the challenges will engender in us the hope we need to take hold of our future together. I decided that I would give my annual address in the context of our worship service because I feel that at the heart of my ministry is what I have been called to do among you in this place: to gather you together so that you may be nourished by God's holy word and at God's holy table and then strengthened to go back into the world to do the work God has given you to do as God's baptized, chosen people. The ministry and mission of this parish are yours to embrace and yours to carry on. As your priest I have been given the great privilege to help you live into your mission with faithfulness, joy and authenticity.

The message which best reflects our year were the words I offered to you in a sermon a few months back, "We're all in this together." We can't possibly live into our mission without having the encouragement, wisdom, support and giftedness of one other. We need each other to carry on this great work God has called us to do. On the night before his crucifixion

Jesus gathered his friends one last time to share in a holy conversation and a holy meal. Jesus was aware that his disciples' lives were about to change in a dramatic way and that they would never be the same again. "Love one another as I have loved you," he said to them.

Jesus knew that they would need to rely on each other now more than ever. He hoped that they would care for one another as he had cared for them throughout his earthly life. He hoped that the same love he freely gave to them, the love which originated in his Father, would be reflected in them and through them even after he was gone. That love, he knew would bind them together and empower them to carry on his mission and ministry in the world. It is what has bound us together in all we have experienced this year. In all aspects of our common life we have come to appreciate more fully the fact that we are fellow travelers on the journey.

We spent intentional time this year engaged in holy conversations. Whether we were gathered in a vestry member's home for a cottage communion, at the Big Circle Meeting on Education, making our St. Peter's quilt squares at Everyone Ed, on one of our vestry retreats or in the many other informal and formal conversations we began to share our stories, share our love for this community and our hopes and dreams for our future. We began to see with new eyes the giftedness of our sisters and brothers and the exciting possibilities which lay ahead for our parish.

Together, we also shared in moments of joyful, meaningful worship. At our Homecoming Sunday we reaffirmed our desire to create a safe and welcoming place for all children, honoring their gifts and ministries among us. At my installation service we publically declared our commitment to one another as priest and people and we rejoiced in this new journey we had embarked on. We welcomed two precious children into our community through the waters of baptism and celebrated Jenna and PJ Linke's new life together through the sacrament of marriage. Throughout the year we said goodbye to beloved members of our church family, saints like Elizabeth Miller and Nat Wright. In these liturgies we celebrated their lives and received great comfort and

solace even in our grief. Each and every Wednesday morning a faithful group of us gathered to pray for God's healing grace for ourselves and for each other at our Holy Eucharist and Healing service. In the seasons of Advent and Lent we ended our days with quiet reflection and prayer through our Evening Prayer services. At our 5 o'clock, 8 o'clock and Taize services, using both ancient and modern forms of prayer and song, we were given the opportunity to connect with God and one another in more intimate settings. And finally at Christmas and Holy Week we welcomed others into our community to experience us at our best.

Through service and education we realized that the "we" in "We're all in this together" extends beyond these church doors to friend and stranger alike. Together we prepared hundreds of meals for the Aid for Friends ministry, continued to support our ongoing ministries, such as Thrift and Gift, Rummage Sales, UTO Thank Offering, among many others, we commissioned Frank and Linda Toia for their annual pilgrimage among our brothers and sisters in Guatemala, and through our adult forum series heard again Jesus' words that when we welcome the stranger in our midst, we welcome Jesus himself among us. We were blessed by our visits with fellow parishioners who were in the hospital or homebound and were transformed by our experience among our friends who are homeless. We appreciated in a new way the story of our faith that we share with our Jewish sisters and brothers through the Seder Meal. At our Stuart Fund celebrations we gave thanks for the generosity of Mr. Stuart and the amazing ministries which benefited from his gift and our efforts. In those celebrations we were reminded that utilizing our time, talent and treasure together we are called to go beyond these church walls to be Christ's hands and heart in our world.

Our time and energy spent in property improvements, such as: taking care of the flooding downstairs, the installation of the new sound system and electrical panels, the sewing of the new parish hall curtains and all the ongoing work of our property and garden committees reinforced our need to become better stewards of the abundant gifts God had given us. We were also reminded that taking care of our property is part of our ministry of hospitality- to create a more welcoming environment for all those who use our space. Through the work of the Stewardship Committee we began having honest conversations as a parish about the responsibility we each have as God's stewards to give of our resources to this community we love.

This year we became more connected to one another through our times of fellowship, as well.

The Halloween party, Soup, Salad and Song, Rite 13 and J2A dinner, Summer Fun, Women's dinners and retreat, Advent Open House at the rectory, Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper and Talent Show all gave us opportunities to play, laugh, and have fun together. In all of these and the other, many informal gatherings we learned that this work we have been called to do is also joyful!

Finally, I believe our times of adversity have made us a stronger community. We have had to tackle some very difficult and painful things. And yet I believe through the leadership of our courageous Vestry as well as the tremendous support of many parishioners working on your behalf: members of the Finance Committee, Personnel committee, Office Transition Team, and Education Steering Committee we have not shied away from the hard work. Rather, we have been able to meet these changes with enthusiastic determination. Through the efforts of the Education Discernment Team we have begun to discern a new model for our ministry of Christian Formation and are

currently engaged in a process in which to call an individual to be our Director of Faith Formation. We have become better informed of our finances and of the administrative workings of our parish. The restructuring of the office staff will help us get closer to balancing our budget and also allow more members of our community to share in the ministry of administration.

I want to take this opportunity to publicly acknowledge the ministries of Dianne Barnes and Mike Sayer. They both had the courage to stick it out with us during this difficult time and to help us move smoothly through this transition. I am grateful for their many years of service among us, both as staff members and as fellow parishioners. At our last staff meeting I told them both that they were an important part of the fabric which forms our community and that even after they were to leave us, they would always remain a part of that fabric. I pray that one day when each of them walks through these doors again they will realize they have returned home as one of the family.

I will tell you that one of the most holy experiences for me over this past year was our all parish meeting in January. In that gathering we truly embodied Jesus' words, "Love one another as I have loved you." With deep love and honesty, we listened to one other, creating a sacred place where all were honored. The Holy Spirit's presence was palpable in that conversation. And I believe, as a result, we found a renewed sense of commitment to our common life. I believe that the holy work we have accomplished over the past year has placed us on a good, strong foundation from which to build upon in the years to come.

It seems fitting that we begin to look ahead to a new year together in the season of Easter, the season which calls us to embrace the new life given to us in our risen Lord. I

believe we are being asked by God to live in the present moment, not clinging to what was, while, at the same time not rushing ahead to what might be. After the March vestry retreat I came to the realization that we have been living in the tension of two different models of church-one foot seeking to remain planted in the model of the pastoral church and the other seeking to plant itself in the model of the program church. These terms may be unfamiliar to many of you and so I will offer a short explanation. The pastoral church has an average attendance at weekend services of 80-120. It is clergy-centered, meaning much of the ministries occur through the direct leadership of the priest and a small group of lay leaders. A program church has an average attendance at weekend services of 150-250. The circle of involvement is broadened through more active lay leadership and the work of committees. The priest serves to empower parishioners to take on more leadership roles and develop ministries without her direct supervision.

With an average weekend attendance of 130-140 we fall in the middle of these two models. The vestry and I both believe that we have been pushing ourselves to be that program model church when that is not who we are at this particular time in our life together. We do not want to wear ourselves out because we are trying to be something we, in fact, are not. What I and the Vestry hope that we can accomplish together in this second year of my rectorship is to live more faithfully exactly as we are. Let's create our own model of being church-the St. Peter's model of being church!

We are entering a time of great discovery and growth as a community, learning together what it means for us to live as Easter people, called always to embrace the promise of new life. Beginning in June the Vestry and I will begin to work with each committee and ministry to engage in an intentional process of reflection and conversation. One thing I've noticed about our community is that because we are going

in so many different directions, enthusiastically taking on so many different ministries and programs and projects (all of which are worthwhile) that we are left with very little room for time to stop and gauge our spiritual blood pressure, so to speak.

I want us to begin asking one another these questions: “How are we doing?” “What is life-giving about this ministry?” “What is stretching us too thin?” “Why are we doing what we are doing?” “What might we need to let go of so that new birth can occur?” In carving out the time to have such honest, thoughtful conversations with one another we will be able to live more authentically and joyfully as the people of St. Peter’s Church. I also believe that engaging in such an exercise will give us the courage we need to take hold of those hopes and dreams which we shared with one another throughout this past year. This is the next, exciting step in our collective journey.

I leave you with words I offered in my sermon on my very first Sunday among you, words that ring as true today as they did back in June. I have no doubt that we will continue to be led into uncharted waters, called to do God’s holy work in ways we could not have imagined possible. I also have no doubt that Jesus will be there with us. “Do not be afraid,” he will reassure us. “Trust each other. Trust me. Trust in the journey. I have shown you the way before. I will show you the way which lies ahead.” Friends, may we hold onto the promise that the risen Christ will continue to meet us along the way. He will be there to bind us together in love and enliven us with the Holy Spirit in order to share joyfully in his risen life as His Easter people.

For all that was...thanks be to God!

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For all that will be...thanks be to God! *Amen.*