

Rector's Address for the Annual Meeting 2012

St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Williamsburg, Virginia

In this fifth year of our partnership together in ministry, it is my deep pleasure to be able to give this rector's address at our Annual Meeting. I can honestly say that I'm more excited about ministry here at St. Martin's today than I was when I arrived almost five years ago.

This address is made easier by the reports you've already heard from our wardens and treasurer. And this is part of the great good news of St. Martin's. Ministry is done and led by the laity as well as the clergy of this church; in fact, I would say that the huge majority of ministry is done by the laity – staff and volunteers. And this is the way it needs to be. Yes, we will always need clergy to lead the sacramental ministry handed down through our bishops over the millennia. Yes, we, in our Episcopal Church, have appointed the rector as chief in charge of ensuring that the church has a guiding vision that grows the ministries church instead of just sustaining the current operations of the institution. Yes, we depend on clergy to be the ultimate enterprise managers, by virtue of our canons. But truly, the church works best when clergy and vestry and lay leaders are dreaming the dream together, listening to the Holy Spirit together, undertaking the good work of discernment together and doing the work of ministry together.

As I've prayed about speaking to you about the year past and the new year we've embarked on, the image that came to mind is the word "sanctuary." This word sanctuary has been claimed by our vestry in the last two years (Vision Point II), and it is evident to me as I review the last 47 years of St. Martin's history that being sanctuary is at the heart of our core values as a congregation. Let me be clear about what we mean by sanctuary, first by dispelling a notion. By sanctuary, we do not mean a place where people accused of criminal misconduct can hide out from law enforcement. By sanctuary, we also do not limit ourselves to this particular church building in which we worship. The sanctuary that the church offers happens in a variety of places – in the Zig Zag education building, in the offices, the preschool, the parish hall. I would even suggest that many of you, when you do ministries of mercy out in the community – like FISH food pantry, or Grove meals, or Peninsula Jail ministry, or mentoring for wounded warriors – that you carry sanctuary with you and share it with those you serve.

When we say that we intend people to find sanctuary at St. Martin's, we mean this: we intend people to have a special awareness of God's presence that changes the quality of life for them, from one in which they are an isolated person in a competitive society struggling to preserve themselves to a quality of life in which they know they are God's beloved and see that they are recognized as beloved by the community here at St. Martin's. God is always blessing. God is out and about in our world. And yet, we miss it – we miss seeing the blessing and we

don't always see God on our way to the grocery store, or school or the doctor's office or work or the car mechanic. And so we need a place, a concrete, physical place that focus our attention on the God who is blessing us, God who is regarding us as the beloved, and asking us to be agents of grace in the world so that everyone else also may know themselves as beloved.

So, you have to have a place. A place that's safe; a place that's clean; a place where stuff works; a place that will be here for the long-haul; a place where people know that they will reliably find welcoming smiles, appropriate and safe treatment, the grace of God poured out through baptism, eucharist and other sacramental rites, equipping for spiritual growth and renewal and opportunities for serving our community in Christ's name. The vestries and volunteers of this church have worked diligently over the last several years to make sure St. Martin's can continue to be sanctuary – just a few examples to make the point. They have made it safe through being trained to keep children safe from potential child abuse. They have made it safe by maintaining the trees in our wooded lot and taking down trees that threaten to fall because of disease, damage or age. They have made it safe by understanding this fragile spot of land we're on and the Mill Creek watershed of which we're part as the water drains down to the James River and the Chesapeake Bay. They have made it safe by taking every measure to reduce the risk of flooding – the final one of which is being tackled this year as we reconstruct the drain that runs along the north and northeast sides of the office and Miles Hall.

To have a place to find sanctuary, you also need things to be clean and need equipment that works. We owe a debt of gratitude to the volunteers on our Kitchen Committee for keeping our food areas maintained; to the building and grounds committee for helping us to come to terms with many of our maintenance obligations and to find ways to do them in economical ways; and to Lora Price, our parish administrator for leading our effort to update our computers, website, printing capabilities and telephone systems. Quite seriously, I can't thank particular individuals because there are simply too many to name.

You may not realize how much people need to encounter the sanctuary of God's presence here at St. Martin's. But if not, let me tell you. I speak with newcomer after newcomer who says things like, "I had no idea there was a church like this." "This is exactly what I need." "I've been looking for a church like this for years." "I can't believe the exciting things that are going on here." Now, we are not perfect, we all know that, but we are providing sanctuary, and I hope you feel allow yourselves to feel the satisfaction of this fact. People can encounter sanctuary here because you each practice hospitality, generosity and invitation toward each other and make room for newcomers.

So being a sanctuary, being a safe place for people to encounter the living God, is a wonderful first step, but it leads to a second step which is about our future. Sanctuary is not only a place of welcoming but it's also a place of transformation – a place where, having

experienced the living God, we become different, we grow – in fact, we grow into the image and likeness of Christ, as the Apostle Paul put it. And we need to grow – individually we need to grow to cope with our lives, whether that’s because we’re aging beyond the “golden years,” or being challenged by being the parents of children, or figuring out how to be ethical Christians in our various workplaces, or wanting to be healers and reconcilers in our families, or being caught up short by the divisiveness in our culture and wanting to be part of a more constructive United States. We need to grow as individuals, and all these things I’ve mentioned are things I see people working on every week at St. Martin’s.

But this growth doesn’t come from participating in worship and doing our ministries alone. The kind of growth that is associated with being remade in the image of Christ requires education, an active prayer life, and the support of a small group of people who will support us in prayer, equip us with knowledge and tools, and sometimes even challenge us in love. At St. Martin’s, now that we have made our physical plant and basic operations stable enough to provide sanctuary, our future needs to focus on how to be transformed in this sanctuary into the image and likeness of Christ. Our vestry has this focus in mind, as you have seen from many of the goals in our Action Plan. And I ask you each to spend some time thinking about how you wish to grow spiritually and look for ways already here at St. Martin’s Church to do that. For it is clear to me, that God’s gift for the larger community in Williamsburg is to find the presence and love of God here, but in the process of providing sanctuary for others, we must hold onto our commitment to grow ourselves in the stature of Christ Jesus.