



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

How are we doing?

January 23, 2011

The Rev. Sharon Gracen

“Come follow me.” With those words, Jesus began a movement that would eventually become Christianity. He invited fishermen and laborers and tax collectors to join him in creating something new. He preached about the Kingdom of Heaven, showed them what it would look like, and helped them understand how to create it here on earth. We are meant to continue that work, as Christians, as Episcopalians, as Trinity Church. It is “State of the Union” Address time and the week before our own Annual Meeting, so it seems like a good time to ask, “how are we doing?”

I have been here now almost five months, five very busy months, and I can honestly say to you that in my opinion, Trinity Church is one fine place and we are doing really well. But I think a statement like that needs to have some supporting evidence for it to be worth much. It was when I started to try and quantify such a position that I realized how many different measuring sticks one might use to assess the state of the parish.

First, we can look at the basic things that churches use to rate themselves—attendance, finances, and programs. Every year, Episcopal congregations have to file what is known as a Parochial Report with the national church – it can be a nightmare to complete, but it helps to track some important trends. I haven’t tackled ours yet, but I can tell you that our average Sunday attendance – a much watched number - has been trending up, and we have over 200 people regularly worshipping at Trinity on a Sunday. That is very healthy.

As to finances, many parishes might envy the state of our affairs...we have no mortgage, we have money in the bank in the form of endowments and our basic expenses are covered by our regular income. In many ways, it is good, but as Einstein said, “it’s all relative.” For example, we may not have a mortgage, but we have an historic building that requires constant attention, which can involve significant cost. So let me emphasize again, our basic expenses are covered, but not a penny more – some of our programs are going wanting and cannot do all that they might. The good thing is that future increases in our giving will go directly to programs and make it possible for us to do more, within our church community and out in the world.

Now, to say a bit more about finances and giving, by way of comparison, the average pledge in the Episcopal Church across the country is almost \$2400. Ours is not quite \$1800. The Diocese with the highest level of giving is West Tennessee – not a wealthy area by any stretch of the imagination—their average pledge is \$3850. I am challenged by this information, and hopeful.



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Now when we get to domain of program, we find ourselves in a really exciting place. We have a fine music program, with talented musicians who are energized and creative. We have a really good Godly Play program for our Sunday School, with dedicated teachers, and we have a nursery run by volunteers who happen to be child care professionals. While we have great teachers for our youth, we are lacking some numbers there – I believe this may be more of reflection on our culture than anything else – who knows a teenager that isn't scheduled to within an inch of his or her life? As far as adult programs are concerned, we are admittedly just beginning.

Fellowship and Outreach have been historic strengths at Trinity and they will only get better. All in all, when I think about all that is going on here, I'm so excited I can hardly stand it. As you all know, I am particularly excited about our new Council of Ministries and how it will usher in a new era of transparency, leadership empowerment, and program development for this congregation.

There are, however, less statistical ways of looking at the church that we need to consider. How are we doing as a community in following Christ? I had an opportunity to read the Constitution and By-laws of Trinity Church which say that Trinity Church was founded in 1748 and its mission is to "preach the Gospel." I thought, "You know, this might be a problem." You see, I think that there is big difference between being a community that preaches the Gospel and one committed to *living* the Gospel.

I have serious issues with how Christianity has been taught throughout the centuries since Jesus said, "follow me." Jesus' good news to the poor and the oppressed was that things did not have to be the way they were. He showed us how to make heaven here on earth through love and sacrifice. He did not say, "tough it out and things will be better in heaven." But that's pretty much the gist of what has been taught in a lot of Christian denominations and churches, which emphasize believing the right thing or behaving the right way so you will get into Heaven, where everything will be fine.

Mainstream American Christianity has had little to say about spiritual journey and the pursuit of spiritual growth. When we first started talking about spiritual journey at Faith in California – people had no idea what it meant. "Is this something else that I have to do?" they asked. Well, no. We are all on a journey. It really depends on whether or not we want to pay attention to it and become aware of the ways in which God is working in our lives. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a brilliant French philosopher, priest and scientist who died in 1955. He said many great things but in my opinion none better than his statement that, "we are not human beings seeking a spiritual experience but rather spiritual beings having a human experience". I find that changes my perspective on virtually every aspect of my daily life and turns it into an exciting journey of discovery. I also think it identifies the real work of the church – the pursuit of spiritual maturity.



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I invite you to ponder this idea and apply it to your life. The questions begin to ask themselves. What is the purpose of your human experience and how do you perceive the events, the struggles, and triumphs of your life from the perspective of a spiritual being. If we're all on the same journey, where are we going and how do we get there? When Thomas the apostle asked these questions, Jesus said that he is the way, the model of spiritual maturity. From all that we know of his life and teaching; the narrow door, the rocky path, and talk of losing one's life to save it—including his willingness to do so himself—we understand that this journey will not always be easy. Hopefully we also have an understanding of the joy and peace that follow when we truly give ourselves to Christ and commit to spiritual growth.

There is no way that I can stand before you this morning and tell you about the nature of your individual spiritual journeys, but I can reassure you that as a community we are on the right track. And I can promise you that I will help you find tools and signs along the way, which will aid you in your journey, and I can further assure you that you never travel alone. Your spiritual life affects each and every one of us here, because we are a fully integrated community—we are the Body of Christ.

Learning more and more about this human experience and what it means to be a spiritual being constitutes the purpose of our work together. It's exciting work, and purpose is essential to the growth and development of any community. One of the things that pleases me most about the state of this church is that it is filled with really good people, and you have already shown that you are courageous and curious of mind, with open hearts that know how to love. So from where I stand, this place looks like Cape Canaveral, and we are ready for lift-off, ready to begin our journey further and deeper into God's purpose and God's future. Fasten your seatbelts!