

## **Rector's Report for the St. Mark's Annual Meeting**

January 22, 2017

“This is your year! Live fully!” is the compelling message on a blue background above a photo of savory shish kebabs on a plate next to a bowl of mixed fruit and veggie salsa. On the surface, Weight Watchers and Christianity have a lot in common. Weight Watchers has weekly meetings where members gather for thirty to forty minutes to listen to an inspirational talk, weigh in and recommit to their weight loss goals. Christians gather weekly to pray, sing, listen to an inspirational talk and recommit to the tenants of their faith. Weight Watchers members pay dues. Christians pledge or tithe to support their churches. Weight Watchers traces its beginnings to the early 1960s when Jean Nidetch, a Queens, New York housewife began inviting friends to her home once a week to talk about how best to lose weight. Christianity traces its roots to an itinerant preacher who talked about the kingdom of God. Both have their sacred texts and creeds. While Weight Watchers proclaims, “This is your year. Live fully!” Jesus says, “I came so that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

Looking beyond the surface, Christianity and Weight Watchers diverge dramatically. Ultimately, Weight Watchers is about self-improvement – losing weight, adopting healthy eating habits and feeling better about yourself. Self-improvement is a huge industry, and Weight Watchers is just one example. Yes, you can become a better person in ten days if you follow ten easy steps promised by the bestseller in the airport bookstore. Christianity is not self-improvement, although you might think so when there are churches talking about how discovering God will help you to achieve wealth and prosperity for you and your family. One Bible study thinly veils self-improvement with this promise: “With Jesus you can step into a beautiful, full, life-giving future filled with purpose.” Jesus is not at all concerned with self-improvement. Look no further than today’s Gospel reading from Matthew. Having returned to Galilee after being baptized by John the Baptist, the first thing Jesus does is look for helpers. He calls out to Peter and Andrew and James and John “Follow me!” and they do – immediately. The text says then that Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. In our mind’s eye, we should not see Jesus by himself doing this but with a growing number of followers by his side. Jesus is inviting and proclaiming – inviting people to follow him and proclaim the reality and nearness of God’s kingdom. There is nothing wrong with self-improvement. But that is not what Jesus and Christianity are about. Jesus does not promise that we will lose weight or be more successful or even happier. He is inviting us to see and proclaim with him the kingdom of God, and seeing the kingdom of God begins with seeing the people around us in a different light. With Jesus, the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light – in the faces of the lepers, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the beggars and everyone else. Self-improvement focuses inward, on the finite self. Christianity focuses outward, expanding our perspectives and opening our hearts and minds to the people around us and to the infinite beauty of God’s creation. Proclaiming the kingdom of God is anything but a road to self-improvement. It is hard work. Being church is hard work. And our hymnal reminds us of the truth of the Christian Life with the verse “the peace of God it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.” (Hymn 661).

Jesus continues to say “Follow me,” which people have been hearing here at St. Mark’s since 1897. As we hold our 120<sup>th</sup> annual meeting, it is a moment to reflect on both stable foundations and head-spinning change. In January, 1898, 120 years ago today, Glen Ellyn was a very different town than it is today, with dirt roads and a population of 780 people. From its humble beginnings, this church community has witnessed a Great Depression sandwiched between two World Wars, 21 Presidents as of Friday, the arrival and proliferation of automobiles, telephones,

hippies, yuppies, and millennials, and multiple waves of immigrants and population movements. Change continues as ever with retail institutions such as Giesche Shoes and Soukups Hardware going out of business. St. Mark's has grown with Glen Ellyn, building and tearing down and rebuilding a church building with a parish hall, pushing out the front exterior to add space, building a library space to connect the church with a house that became offices, and recently tearing down and rebuilding classrooms and what is named Mahon Hall. With more people in Glen Ellyn, there were more churches – Catholic, Bible, Evangelical, Community, Scientist, Methodist, Jehovah and now an Ahmadiyya Mosque. At the same time in recent years, Sunday is no longer reserved for going to church. On Sundays, the parking lot at Ackerman Sports and Fitness Center begins to fill up at 7:00 am just as the line at Starbucks forms and parents get ready to take their kids to birthday parties and soccer and hockey games. And what about the changes at St. Mark's beyond the building? When previously only men were allowed to be clergy, women are deacons, priests and bishops; when communion was only for those who were confirmed, infants and children may receive communion; when those who had been divorced were shunned and gay people were diagnosed as having a mental disease, are now welcome and find a church home; when penitence and sin stood at the center of worship as opposed to Eucharist; when baptisms were private and not a frequent part of Sunday worship. Through all of this change, hardship, prosperity, polarity, in both church and society, Jesus still calls out to each and every one of us: Follow me.

Follow me is not a call to self-improvement but an invitation. It is an invitation from God without coercion or threat, but offered with promise and goodness. It is an invitation to discover the nearness of God's presence. It is an invitation to step out of fear and threat. It is an invitation to risk what you know for what unfolds in mysterious and unexpected ways. It is an invitation to practice generosity, community and all of the virtues, including forgiveness, patience, listening, and learning. The invitation is renewed daily, weekly, yearly, to each of us as individuals and as a community as a whole.

What does "follow me" look like at St. Mark's today? On December 11, we celebrated the festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the five year anniversary of a Sunday worship service in Spanish. What started and continues as an experiment, just as St. Mark's as a whole continues as an experiment, is an increasingly vibrant and dedicated element of the St. Mark's community – men, women and children who speak Spanish either as a first or second language, who are new to the Episcopal church and seeking to hear and respond to God's call to "follow me." This five-year anniversary is something to celebrate and see as a continued invitation to grow and deepen as a multicultural church community. Thank God Victor and Lucia Conrado said yes to the call to come to St. Mark's back in October, 2011. Their yeses have led to so many more. Like a snowball, the invitation grows and grows. The National Episcopal Church is paying attention to what we are doing, and Victor is involved in several initiatives to share what we have learned. Becoming a multicultural church is not easy and very misunderstood. I still have many people, including clergy ask me, "How is your Spanish congregation?" I explain that St. Mark's is one congregation with four Sunday services, including one in Spanish.

Jesus's call to "follow me" is an invitation that must permeate and direct all of St. Mark's. That is why you will be hearing more about "Project Connect" – an effort now in booklet form that invites everyone to learn about and participate in some aspect of worship, formation and outreach of our church. Self-improvement by itself is a force that isolates as does social media and the myriad of news and entertainment choices that create bubbles for every taste, temperament, theology and political ideology. Project Connect is about building connections through meaningful ministries with other people and the whole community. Copies of the Project

Connect booklet with a green cover are found in the narthex and on the St. Mark's web site. You will be seeing and hearing about a highlighted ministry from Project Connect each and every week in the Sunday bulletin.

The spirit of Jesus's call to follow him is one of openness and trust. The Jesus of the Gospels is on the move, crisscrossing Galilee with visits to Tyre, Sidon, Samaria and many towns and villages in between. The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry preaches about "The Jesus Movement" – which captures the spirit of energy and fluidity of the Jesus's proclamation. Since 1897, St. Mark's has occupied the same piece of real estate in Glen Ellyn. There is a danger of being anchored to one location – that the location itself is worshipped and becomes an idol. At the same time, the blessing of a fixed location and a building is the opportunity it provides for the community to gather and renew itself. The responsibility we have is to make use of our building and location to be a sign of God's love and invitation. Over the last decade, St. Mark's has become a house of welcome for seven support groups, children who attend our Parents' Day Out Program and our St. Mark's Preschool, for stamp collectors, a drama camp, the Anima Singers, folkloric dancers, and a yearly conference hosted by the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center. And the list of groups and activities goes on. Seven days a week, St. Mark's is place of gathering, learning, support, healing and prayer. A leader from one of the support groups recently said how absolutely grateful he is to St. Mark's that there is a weekly meeting here, saying "this meeting is literally saving lives."

One of our gifts as an Episcopal church is our tradition and commitment to sacred music. St. Mark's is particularly blessed with our now completed Walker Pipe Organ, a treasure to us now and to future generations as it serves as an inspiration and beacon to our congregation and wide world beyond our doors. As Charles Snider, now retired after 29 years at St. Mark's, put it, "This instrument can and does serve as a funnel into the soul through which theology can be poured." Under the leadership of our Director of Music, Daniel Segner and Associate, Marsha Webster, St. Mark's will work to build on our strong foundation, inviting children, youth and adults to the joys of choir singing and increasing our role and reputation as a center of sacred music.

Music, worship, connections, our location and facilities all find meaning in Jesus's call to follow him. In fact, everything we do must find meaning and relate to this call or it is not what we should be doing. The particular way that we at St. Mark's hear and answer this call depends on the generosity of everyone. This year's Giving Campaign now counts over 340 households who have made a pledge – provided an estimate of their financial support, representing \$680,000. The refined budget for 2017 seeks an additional \$60,000 in pledges beyond this number. The good news is that we can be confident, that with Jesus's invitation to generosity, we will receive those pledges – that we will have enough. The Giving Campaign is not just a one or two month event – but a year-round ministry that seeks participation from every household. Every pledge and every gift is important to St. Mark's. Churches and institutions with large endowments are not able to say this.

Jesus invites each and every one of us to follow him. Knowing how and when to respond to that call is the work of discernment. At St. Mark's, we are so fortunate to have so many people answer the call to serve in leadership roles. Today, at the annual meeting, we will be welcoming five new vestry members, a new junior warden, a new chancellor, a clerk to the vestry, youth representatives to vestry and delegates to our annual diocesan convention. Their pictures and profiles are found in the pages of this annual report. Those who are completing their terms on the vestry are: Mauro Hernandez who has helped pave the way for bilingual participation and

presence at vestry meetings while working on improving the church's communications; Carolyn Faivre who served as our pastoral care contact person and vestry liaison to the worship commission; Hunter Walor who chaired the finance committee and will continue to serve on the St. Mark's investment committee; Kathy Kelly who has organized the food and fun at many parish life events such as the annual picnic, kick-off Sunday, Lenten suppers and the annual meeting; David McCarraher who served as the St. Mark's Funds Manager for 24 years; Bob Lewis who served as Chancellor to the vestry for over ten years; Tim Sullivan who took notes at vestry meetings and the annual meeting as clerk of the vestry; Paige Hardy and Abraham Jimenez who served as youth representatives to the vestry, and Peter Vagt, who as junior warden and senior warden, has provided me with invaluable counsel and support over the past two years. He plans to continue to offer his time and talents as photographer of the life of our church and assist with the Giving Campaign.

St. Mark's has more clergy participating in various ways than many cathedrals. Why? Because they have been invited to preach, teach, counsel and be a part of our church community. Our clergy associates – Robin Currie, Walter Dunnett, Clint Moore, Suzi Holding, Catharine Phillips, Paul-Gordon Chandler and Miguel Briones are an incredible blessing to all of us. Victor Conrado, now over five years as our Associate Rector, helps us to glimpse the kingdom of God in our midst, especially in preaching and leading us into becoming a multicultural church community.

The staff of St. Mark's recently spent a day together on a retreat to reflect on how we work together and support the vision of St. Mark's – being rooted in baptism, growing in faith and branching out into the world. We are a team that works well together, committed to St. Mark's vision.

This past year, we prayed for Dellana Mote as she underwent surgery to replace a defective heart valve. After several months away, she returned to her job stronger and with renewed energy. We rejoice and thank God for her good health, talents and great work as the person who oversees command central – the front office. Marsha Webster provided outstanding and without exaggeration - saintly leadership to our worship and music program during the transition between Charles Snider's retirement and November 1, when Daniel Segner began as our new Director of Music. In June, Kim Reed led the 11<sup>th</sup> annual trip to San Marcos, our companion church in Southeast Mexico, and just last week brought a group of 14 youth from St. Mark's to St. James Cathedral for a marathon reading of the New Testament in the Miqra event – the largest group by far from any church in the diocese. I am grateful for the call to serve that each and every member of the staff demonstrates – for those already mentioned and also for Kristin, Norma, Ginnie, Chris, Samantha and Julian.

And sometime, more often than not, we get called in pairs or in groups. Peter and Andrew were called as were James and John. Cecilia, and our three children, Lydia, Frances, and Geo, were called and have answered that call daily in their support for me and in their love for their church home, St. Mark's.

In a world of constant change and challenge, let us remember that Jesus calls us not into ourselves but to look out, to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom in our midst, finding it in the face of the next, and the next and the next person you see.

Yours in Christ,

George+