

**FROM FR. BELTON:**

With two Sundays gone my time here at St. Stephen's has just begun, and while I missed the first round of your telling stories, I hope to be present at others. In however much time I have with you all one of my goals will be to get you all to think honestly about this parish and the world in which it has been called to serve. Most recently, my thoughts have led me to look at a book entitled **Noah Built His Ark in the Sunshine** by James W. Moore. Moore is the senior pastor at St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas.

One of the points Moore makes in his book is that Noah didn't wait until it started raining to begin work on building the ark. He began construction well before disaster struck. The advice he offers is that every faith community needs to prepare in advance for what is on or just over the horizon. While this is especially good advice for a parish such as St. Stephen's as it goes through this time of transition, Moore made some other points that I would offer you to seriously consider.

You all might remember the name of Jesse Ventura. Ventura used to be a professional wrestler who then went on to become the governor of Minnesota. In one interview, he had this to say about religion: "Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers. It tells people to go out and stick their noses in other people's business."

Ventura went on to say that he considers himself a Christian, and that he believes Jesus Christ is the Savior. But, he also said, "I don't believe necessarily that I need a church to go to. My religious beliefs can be by a lake, they can be on a hill; they can be in the solitude of my own office. And I believe," he said, "that there's no set example of what people's beliefs should be."

And then I came across a story from the United Press International. It was written by Adela McKay, who is described as a follower of Jesus in the Anabaptist and Cistercian traditions. Her essay was entitled **We Skipped Church This Easter**, and in it she wrote the following:

*On Good Friday, one of Joe's friends asked him, "But, if you don't go to church on Easter, how will your kids know what it means to be Christian?"*

*The answer: If being a Christian is getting dressed up once a year and trying to have nice, reverent thoughts about the Resurrection during a somewhat long and dull church service while being intensely distracted by a sick kid (too much candy at the Easter egg hunt) or while fearfully anticipating the annual Easter family spat (Uncle John always gets political over after-dinner croquette) or while mulling a problem at work (whether or not to call the IT on that one) ... Well, heck. Does taking our kids to an Easter church service — or any other service — make them*

*Christian?*

*Frankly, on Easter I'd much rather my kids be out walking with Joe, me, and Jesus - smelling the earth, feeling the warmth, listening to birds, relishing the grays and greens of creation, helping clean up after a tornado.*

And then there is this. Not too long ago it was stated that almost 75% of Americans claim to be Christian, and yet, interestingly, in a Gallup poll pollsters asked people a simple question: "Did you go to church in the last seven days?" Amazingly, the answer didn't match up with the statistics. More people said they went to church than actually would be borne out by the statistics of average attendance in the churches of America. Gallup could not figure out what had happened. Finally, the conclusion was drawn that many people actually *felt* as though they had been in church, even though they hadn't been there.

In response to this the noted religion professor and writer Martin E. Marty worked out a tongue-in-cheek paraphrase of a possible answer given to one of the pollsters who knocked at the door of the home. In this scenario, the homeowner answered the question by saying something like this: "Well, I wasn't actually there in church, but I intended to be there. So put me down as a 'yes.' "

Finally, a poll conducted by the George Barna group found that less than 50% of people attend church with any regularity. More attention grabbing was their data showing that fewer than 20% of Americans believe that participation in a congregation is critical to spiritual growth. All of this is consistent with the most recent data that has shown a significant decline in the number of those who consider themselves Christian.

These stories about Jesse Ventura and Adela McKay and the data from the Gallup and Barna polls should call our attention to the fact that the world around us has little use for the church as it has functioned in our lifetime. These things should serve to remind us that we live in a world that is very different from the one in which most of us grew up. It is very much like the world in which the early Christian Church struggled and grew.

The question is "How might the Church, a local congregation, respond?" Some clue might be taken from some words of the late William Sloane Coffin, former chaplain at Yale University and senior pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. To Jesse Ventura Coffin would respond, "It is often said that the Church is a crutch. Of course it's a crutch. What makes you think you don't limp?"

To Adela McKay he might say, "What's the point of being Christian if you don't also know that what God withholds in the way of protection, he more than supplies in the form of support. For the world breaks God's heart, too. No pain our spirits endure, no

weakness that impairs our bodies, no grief that bows us low fails to find its counterpart in God who, as we see, in Christ suffers with and for us. "He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber or sleep." Sometimes I think it's God's pain, not God's peace, that passes all understanding. So come home to church, not for protection against all the travails of this earth, but rather for all the support that heaven alone can provide. Finally, come to leave. For we come to God's house, to this open house, to find love and to defeat hate, in order that the world itself can become an open house." People who come to understand this never hesitate to serve those who are suffering and in pain.

And to a congregation in transition I suspect he would say, "Most church boats don't like to be rocked; they prefer to lie at anchor rather than go places in stormy seas. But that's because we Christians view the Church as the object of our love instead of the subject and instrument of God's. Faith cannot be passive; it has to go forth—to assault the conscience, excite the imagination. Faith fans the flames of creativity altogether as much as it banks the fires of sin.

And to a parish seeking a new priest, "Every seminary graduate doesn't have to be a prophet. People need priests to stand *with* them as much as they need prophets to stand *over against* them. But "bear one another's burdens" doesn't mean being a pal to every parishioner, a minister someone once described as a "quivering mass of availability." What the second-century physician Galen said of doctors applies equally to pastors: "They heal most successfully in whom the people have the most confidence." A successful pastor is one who unveils Jesus' presence in the everyday lives of ordinary people, someone who can weave sorrow, loss, and especially death into our understanding of life."

Coffin speaks of things a congregation may not necessarily want, but in order to be more spiritually healthy they are things a congregation needs.

Allan+

**REQUESTS: *Your earliest response will be greatly appreciated.***

1. The Gospel Book needs to be replaced with a Revised Common Lectionary version. Estimates for two of the available publications are \$95.00 and \$195:00. If you are interested in donating the funds needed, please contact JoAnn Palmer. Trinity Bookstore is ordering both versions, and the Senior Warden will make a selection based on response to this invitation.
2. If you are interested in learning about the purpose of and activities at General Convention, please let JoAnn Palmer know. Fr. Bennett has offered to do a presentation – one complete session or two shorter sessions – following the hospitality period. The presentation will be more effective and meaningful if it can be scheduled while the General Convention is in progress. Please let me know as Wednesday, July 9<sup>th</sup>.

**FATHER'S DAY BRUNCH:** The celebration was a success on all fronts. The women of the church were quick to volunteer and the menu and tasks accompanying them were in place within two weeks. Under the guidance of Margaret Murtaugh and Brenda McGrew, the breakfast brunch with sausage casseroles, homemade yeast rolls, biscuits, fruit salad, honey-baked ham, Bloody Marys and desserts was enjoyed by one and all. Donna Guess decorated the tables with her usual flair. We took advantage of the gathering to begin chronicling the history and mission of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. Those that spoke did so with knowledge and authority. This process is going to be more of an adventure than we could have guessed. Jim McGrew presented St. Stephen's with a carved wooden plaque similar to the one he made for Tommy and Lynn Dwyer. The inscription states, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." Matthew 18:20. We would like to extend a thank you to all who participated. **Special recognition is given to all the men at St. Stephen's that have taken the time and energy to "father". The day was yours!**

*Carolyn Babb*

**POTLUCK MEALS:** Thank you to all who were able to stay and share in the first Potluck Meal that was combined with our annual Father's Day Brunch. This is really an exciting time. Unique stories were shared from the birth of St. Stephen's, to the overall history of the settlement of this area of South Carolina, as well as personal experiences. Our next Potluck meal will be on Sunday July 19, 2009 immediately following our usual brief summer hospitality period. This meal will be of your choosing. A sign-up sheet is on the bulletin board and all that you will need to do is write your name and how many are coming. Yep, that's it. Simply bring enough food to feed double the amount of people you have signed up for. Beverages will be provided. Come join in the fun and fellowship. Those who would like to share memories or historical knowledge pertaining to St. Stephen's and Ridgeway, please contact Margaret Murtaugh at 803-754-7543 or [cloudsaloft@yahoo.com](mailto:cloudsaloft@yahoo.com) or Brenda McGrew 803-315-8006 [bagoddess1001@gmail.com](mailto:bagoddess1001@gmail.com).

*Margaret Murtaugh*

**ECW NEWS:** Calling all women of the church who are interested in the ongoing process of revitalizing the Episcopal Church Women: We will have our first planning meeting Sunday July 26 immediately following refreshments. The meeting will not last more than an hour so please make your plans accordingly. This will be a very important meeting since it will be laying the corner stone of our ECW by electing officers and a planning committee for the 2009-2010 year. We have a wonderful group of women, and we all look forward to a productive, positive and spiritually rewarding year for ECW and St. Stephen's! *Mary Jane Lever*

**HEALING SERVICE:** This ministry has been a part of the St. Stephen's congregation for many years. Dorothy Gurganious, now gone from us in body but remaining close in memory of her giving spirit, brought to the congregation a healing that was increased through many years of study with The Saint Stephen's Healing Ministry. In the quietness of our sanctuary Bob King and Margie Pratt have remained faithful to

their friend's healing graces, by encouraging all of us to come join in the Healing fellowship. Come! Experience that which God has set aside for just you. I have come to realize in my life that God often does this with me. "Come to me all who are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." *Margaret Murtaugh. Please note: Fr. Thomas Allen can't come for the Holy Eucharist/Healing Service in July. The next H.E./Healing Service will be August 26<sup>th</sup>. See "Events This Month" for the July Healing Service Schedule.*

**FROM THE MISSION COMMITTEE:** At its June meeting the Mission Committee agreed to increase the amount of our 2009 Diocesan Pledge, to help reduce the 2009 diocesan budget deficit, with the understanding that the increase was possible only because we currently do not have a Vicar. The Committee also approved a donation of \$300 to help cover the travel expenses of the diocesan Alternate Delegates to General Convention. The funds that had been budgeted for this purpose were cut in order to reduce the deficit mentioned above. With no Alternate Delegates in attendance there would be no backup for deputies serving on the floor. In the event of illness, injury, family emergency, or fatigue, a deputy will have no certified substitute and our diocese will not be fully represented on the floor of Convention.

Mike Autry assumed responsibility for meeting one of the recommendations made by the Church Pension Group following a Risk Management Survey of the property. The church and parish hall now are equipped with smoke detectors and carbon monoxide and explosive gas detectors.

Several requests for keys to the church and/or parish hall have led us to discover that there is no record of who has keys and what those keys open. We want to make sure that everyone who needs a key has one. We also need to know how many keys are out and who has them. If you currently have keys for any doors, post office box or bank lock box, please send an e-mail to the church ([www.ststephens.org](http://www.ststephens.org)) describing which key(s) you have or enter this information on a sheet posted on the parish hall bulletin board.

**JULY BIRTHDAYS:** *O God, our times are in your hand: look with favor, we pray, on your servants as they begin another year. Grant that they may grow in wisdom and grace, and strengthen their trust in your goodness all the days of their lives. BCP*

Mack Upchurch	7/9	Bitsy Milling	7/17
Bonnie Bryant	7/14	Laura Langdale	7/30

**EVENTS THIS MONTH:**

**Wednesday, July 1:** Healing Service, 6:30pm, church

**Wednesday, July 15:** Healing Service, 6:30pm, church

**Sunday, July 19:** Potluck Meal, following brief hospitality period, in the Parish Hall

**Wednesday, July 22:** Mission Committee Meeting, 7:00pm, Parish Hall

**Sunday, July 26:** ECW planning meeting immediately following refreshments.

**OTHER NEWS/INFORMATION:**

**Mission Church Chat List:** To join, e-mail [bhuman@edusc.org](mailto:bhuman@edusc.org).

**Update Your E-Mail Address For The Electronic Diocesan Newsletter:** [www.edusc.org](http://www.edusc.org).

**Subscribe To The Electronic Diocesan Newsletter:** [bhuman@edusc.org](mailto:bhuman@edusc.org).

**On The Parish Hall Bulletin Board:** **(1)** Results from St. Stephen's responses to the Diocesan Survey that was part of the Bishop Search process. *If you would like an electronic copy of the survey results, e-mail your request to [ststephens@truvista.net](mailto:ststephens@truvista.net).* **(2)** A brief history of the settlement of the region and Fairfield County and the emergence and growth of various denominations. **(3)** A statement from Bishop Henderson regarding Governor Mark Sanford. *You can read the statement on the diocesan website – [www.edusc.org](http://www.edusc.org).*