

✠ **From +Allan Belton:**

Dear Friends:

By the time you receive this issue of the *Epistle* September will be upon us, and, even though we will continue to have summer-like weather, the reality is that churches will resume doing what we should be doing all year round - teaching, preaching, worshipping, giving and serving. However, having evolved something called the "program year", for churches September has become the time to get down to business. For the parish of St. Stephen's that probably means becoming very serious about pursuing your search for a new priest. As part of that process you will need to consider, as I have said on more than one occasion, who you are as a congregation and why you are in business. Determining these is important because if you do not you will likely be a congregation that is simply adrift with no direction and a candidate for a priest who is either a bad match or one who simply uses St. Stephen's as a way station waiting for something better to come along. Neither of these scenarios bodes well for a congregation. With all of this in mind let me offer you the following.

In the literature about church development and church growth you will find a number of lists that seem to identify healthy, vital congregations. When considering any of these lists, it is important to remember that growth can be looked at in more than one way, and numerical growth is not always the most important or the best. The two lists that I would like to present to you emphasize qualitative growth which I happen to think is more important than numerical growth when a parish is in the process of redefining who it is and what business it is in.

After doing considerable research both here and abroad, a man named Christian Schwarz, developed a system that has become known as Natural Church Development. It is a different system than the one presently being explored here in the Diocese of Upper South Carolina. In his work Schwarz found that healthy, growing churches shared the eight quality characteristics found in the following list.

- Empowering leadership
- Gift-oriented ministry
- Passionate spirituality
- Functional structures
- Inspiring worship services
- Holistic small groups
- Need-orientated evangelism
- Loving relationships

The second list came from an article in *Congregations* published by the Alban Institute. It is a list derived from the story of Abiding Hope Lutheran Church in Littleton, Colorado and its experience following the shootings at Columbine High School. For the members of this congregation vitality is marked by:

- A positive, healthy spirit that can be sensed by first-time worshipers.
- A clear sense that the gathered people are caught up in a movement that matters, and that this vocation has found traction in their lives.
- Authenticity - a sense of "realness" rather than pretense; and unashamed immersion in the church's ancient story.
- Courage to address the depths of the human condition and to enter the darkest corridors of pain and suffering.
- A visibly unshaken hopefulness, gratitude, and joy about life and the future.
- The ability to cry together and to laugh together.
- An atmosphere of creative conflict, with passions running deep about the life of the community and its purpose.
- A gift for serving as a grace-filled place of healing.
- A spirit of resilience, accompanied by enormous capacities to weather adversity.

As I look at these two lists, it seems to me that in order to live out what is said in the second, a congregation needs to function with the characteristics found in the first.

In the brief time that I have been with you I have not had much opportunity to glimpse to what degree these characteristics are present here. Unfortunately, like many congregations there may be some sense here that you are functioning in a survival mode and may continue to do so for the foreseeable future. What often comes along with this mentality is a form of anxiety that tends to get in the way of healthy development. So, what I would like to do is encourage you all to develop the kind of commitment to the above characteristics that would allow very little to stop their becoming part of the DNA, the very fabric, of this parish. If this happens, then I suspect that the congregation of St. Stephen's will find itself better able to live out the characteristics found in the second list. And it is these signs of vitality that I would hope would be found whenever anyone encounters anyone who is a part of the life here.

Allan+

✠ ***THE DIOCESE AND ST. STEPHEN'S: Findings from the Bishop Search Survey Results and the Diocesan Profile.*** Survey results and information provided by the Senior Warden and the Delegates to Convention were used to create the Diocesan Profile. Thirteen members of St. Stephen's participated in the Bishop Search Survey. If you did not participate in the survey, it becomes even more important for you to let the Mission Committee know what you believe/want the congregation's vocation and mission to be. If you envision a variety of mission/outreach activities and education and pastoral care programs, they can be realized and successful with your participation and support. Are worship services and the spiritual nourishment and renewal they provide the most important thing to you? Do you want to see more events and activities organized to provide an opportunity for people to gather in community? Are all of these things important to you, or just some of them? The

Mission Committee needs to know to ensure that your vision of vocation and mission help form and guide the future of St. Stephen's. The following was extracted from the Profile and the Survey results and may help you clarify your vision, or simply serve as information. *Note: St. Stephen's information/responses are presented in (italics).* JoAnn Palmer

Diocesan Profile/Clergy: The clergy represent a variety of worship traditions, including broad church, evangelical, Anglo-catholic, and charismatic, and almost every expression of Anglican faith and practice can be found among them. As evidenced by the results of the Diocesan Survey, many of the clergy tend to hold more liberal views than the majority of parishioners. **Diocesan Profile/Congregations:** There are 62 parishes and missions in the diocese - two are resource size parishes (3%), nine are program size parishes (15%), 12 are transitional size parishes (19%), 12 are pastoral size parishes (19%) and 26 are family size congregations (42%) of which 16 are missions. (Note: the percentages have been rounded up or down and do not equal 100%.) The Profile focuses on average Sunday attendance and pledge and plate income - important statistical indicators of the spiritual energy and financial health of congregations. St. Stephen's is considered a Family Size Mission - average Sunday attendance up to 75 people. Consider the following profile for this size church: The 26 family size congregations represent 13% of the diocese's 2007 average Sunday attendance and 11% of its pledge and plate income. Sixteen are the only Episcopal congregations in small towns in the diocese (*St. Stephen's*), and three are historically African American. Six of the 26 family size congregations grew in average Sunday attendance during the past 15 years, but the great majority of the congregations that were family size congregations in 2007 have experienced significant decline. Collectively, the congregations in this group lost 27% of their average Sunday attendance during the period 1992-2007 (*remained relatively stable at an average attendance of 44*). A major factor has been the migration of executive and professional families to larger urban areas. The median pledge and plate income for our family size parishes was \$66,782.00 in 2007 (*\$82,278*).

Striving For Common Vision - Opportunities And Challenges: The overarching sentiment from the survey was that, as a diocese, we truly value the sense of unity and purpose our Episcopal faith offers. As members of the Body of Christ, we affirmed a distinctly positive direction and commitment to the future of this diocese. Nonetheless, as might be expected among Episcopalians, our diocesan survey revealed occasional areas of disagreement over theology, culture and liturgy. An analysis of the data received (*from the survey*) indicates that the Diocese is a very stable institution, secure in its traditional approach to Anglicanism, and that we value harmony and goodwill among ourselves, while recognizing that there is still much work to be done.

The 2051 responses to the survey represent approximately 24% of average Sunday attendance for our diocese (*30%*). About 70% of respondents were over 50 years of age (*100%*). Thirty percent have children resident in their households (*8%*). Seventy-three percent have been Episcopalians for more than 20 years (*85%*) and over half have been in their present parish for more than ten years (*61%*).

There was general agreement in total and across all size categories of parishes, regarding the most important issues or opportunities facing the diocese, as well as the desired strengths and characteristics of a new bishop. No size category chose an item that did not have broad support in the overall survey. The laity and clergy were in general agreement on most issues: for example, easing financial pressures on congregations during these times of financial difficulties (59%), remaining consistent with the traditional liturgies set forth in the Book of Common Prayer (100%) - over 90% of all respondents support traditional Anglican liturgy, and believing the Holy Scriptures to be the Word of God and all that is necessary for salvation (86%). The clergy were more supportive of statements about same gender issues facing our church; however, the majority of both clergy and laity opposes same gender marriages (84%). Although, we have diversity and some disagreement over sexuality, we are primarily concerned with building up the Body of Christ. Both clergy and laity overwhelmingly believe we should encourage outreach programs in the diocese (85%), but less than 20% of clergy and well below half of laity think we are effective at evangelizing (62%). While a substantial majority of survey respondents supported a conservative approach to theology, culture and liturgy, we are, by no means, of one mind on these issues.

A majority of St. Stephen's respondents also found the following to be important. The Bishop should: be a strong advocate for the well-being of clergy, particularly concerning their compensation and benefits (77%); have an understanding of the cultural dynamics of South Carolina (100%); be supportive of the Windsor Report and ongoing process (77%); always stand on Christian principles, even if he stands alone (93%); a strong preacher/orator, fully committed to evangelism and outreach to the unchurched (77%); and support traditional liturgies as set forth in the Book of Common Prayer (100%). Other: it is important to remain in the Anglican Communion (100%); divisiveness in the wider Church is beginning to cause problems in this diocese (70%); gender is not an issue in the context of ordination to the priesthood (85%); the Nicene Creed is a sufficient statement of Christian faith (92%); accept the theology and doctrine found in An Outline of Faith: The Catechism (BCP, pp. 845-862) (92%); maintaining unity and focus on mission within our diocese is important (93%).

The Five Most Important Issues/Opportunities (Selected By At Least 50% Of Respondents) Identified By St. Stephen's Respondents Compared To All Respondents:

- Declining membership: 69% vs. 48%
- Evangelism and outreach with sensitivity to our changing demographics: 54% vs. 45%
- Programs that minister to multiple generations: 46% vs. 49%
- Declining Average Sunday Attendance: 46% vs. 32%
- Recruiting, training, developing, ordaining and retaining clergy: 46% vs. 43%

The Five Most Important Strengths/Characteristics Of A New Bishop Identified By St. Stephen's Respondents Compared To All Respondents:

Integrity: 77% vs. 62%
 Commitment to Anglican Communion: 54% vs. 24%
 Deeply spiritual and prayerful: 46% vs. 50%
 Possesses sound judgment and wisdom: 46% vs. 49%
 Strong theological background: 38% vs. 25%

✠ **West Virginia Trip - Kayla Branham**

On July 4-11, the Aimwell Presbyterian youth group went to Fairmont, West Virginia on a short term mission trip. Their destination was Dayspring's Camp. It would be called home for the next week along with 170 other short term mission teams. Dayspring provided bunk houses, bath houses, a kitchen, and a place to worship after a long days work. From Monday through Friday, the Aimwell team worked to improve the homes of Ms. Taylor and Mr. and Mrs. Hines. These houses were side by side. The team painted the exterior of the house, installed windows, replaced interior walls, and installed a kitchen floor for Ms. Taylor's home. The team also had to weather proof a door frame and replace dry wall in a stairwell that was long past the danger of caving. The Hines' house required new fascia board, gutters, and new tiles in the ceilings of the kitchen and bathroom. Prior to installing new tile, the old tiles were removed. This along with installing dry wall was the most complex job for the team. The Hines' home required extensive exterior painting. Each task was assessed individually to notice the positive improvements of the houses. Spiritual growth also took place for all the team members. God opened each individual's eyes to different aspects of the trip. We have a greater appreciation of our present environment. We also had a prayer chair we sat in daily to pray for strength and endurance. We also prayed for the teams and the host families. This was a positive and uplifting experience for me and I hope to continue going on the trip next year.

✠ **September 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*

Matthew Harris	9/7	Carolyn Cosby	9/26
George C. Langdale	9/15	Gaye Milling	9/26
Dutch Lindsay	9/18	John Cosby	9/28
Margaret Murtaugh	9/24	Berk Palmer	9/30

✠ **St. Stephen's Cookbook:** The ECW is now requesting recipes for the cookbook. Contact Karen Kuehner (karenkuehner@yahoo.com) for the form(s) you'll need to submit your contribution(s). When you're done, send/give them to either Frances DeBerry or Karen **by September 30.**

✠ **JABER* Reminder:** The volunteers at Fairfield Community Foodbank are grateful for any non-perishable foodstuffs we deliver to them. St. Stephen's has agreed to provide, in acronym order*, **J**elly, **A**pplesauce, **B**iscuit Mix (Jiffy, generic), **E**vaporated

Milk, Rice (the “instant” or boil-in-bag varieties are especially good choices.) The need is greater than ever. Add JABER to your weekly grocery shopping list.

✠ **Spiritual Development & Growth Opportunities: Offered by the Diocese**

Happening is a weekend event for youth in grades 10-12 which is focused on encountering Christ within community and learning how to strengthen our relationship with Christ and each other. The weekend is structured on a program which is governed by the National Happening Committee. Each diocese with a Happening program develops its own local flavor and traditions. Each weekend is basically the same program, with variations due to the individuals who make up the team. One only “makes” one Happening weekend, but can participate as a team member on subsequent weekends. Happening Weekend (#62) will be held December 4-6, 2009. As with all youth programs in the Diocese, questions about Happening, may be directed to the Rev’d Canon L. Sue von Rautenkranz. **Cursillo, for adults**, is designed to help those in the Church understand their individual callings to be Christian leaders. The leadership may be exercised in one’s work situations, in one’s family and social life, in one’s leisure activities, and within the Church environment. Leadership, in Cursillo, does not mean power over others, but influence on others; all of us need to be aware that we can exert a positive influence on those around us. The goal of Cursillo is the goal of the Church: to bring all to Christ. This is done when informed, trained leaders set out with the support of others having a similar commitment. The weekend is structured based on a national movement, the National Episcopal Cursillo program, with local flavor and traditions.

✠ **Spiritual Development & Growth Opportunities: Sundays at St. Stephen’s**

Children’s Sunday School: The children will be studying Christian values.

Adult Class: A study of the Collects led by Bob King.

✠ **St. Stephen’s Potluck Sundays:** Helping to organize the potluck meals has been such fun. It is very fortunate for Stephen’s that our wonderful congregation has been a supportive help. The Homecoming Potluck fellowship was heartwarming with the turnout of many of you. The array of delicious foods was fully enjoyed. We thank Sara and Eleanor for the beauty of their floral arrangements. ***The next potluck will be September 13th.*** This time it will be an All Salads Potluck. I know of someone who has said she will make Chicken Salad. She is also the woman who helped me early on when the idea for potlucks first took shape. Thank you. Ladies and Gentlemen, get out the cookbooks and/or be creative. Even something as simple as sliced tomatoes, cucumbers or other vegetables or fruits would be just fine. A sign-up page is on the bulletin board. *We thank you, Margaret and Brenda.*

✠ **September Dates:**

13 – Sunday Church School resumes, 9:30a.m.; Next Potluck Meal

23 – Mission Committee Meeting, 7:00p.m., Parish Hall

26 – Diocesan Training Day, St. Martin’s in the Field