

**Making Room for New Energy and Deeper Connections**  
*A Statement from the Vestry of St. Mark's Church*  
*November 20, 2005*

The results of the 2006 Canvass are in. We raised over \$840,000 -- an 18 percent increase from last year, and the highest level of pledges in the history of St. Mark's. The number of pledging members is also up 14 percent from last year -- including over 40 new members.

A lot of the credit goes to Greg Niblett, who invested an enormous amount of personal energy, time, skill, and commitment into this effort, and to the many others who worked alongside him. But, as Greg himself points out, much of the success of this year's Canvass is due to the energy that has been building in our community over the past several months. There are more new faces in church on Sunday morning, and many of them are choosing to make St. Mark's their church home. We have a lively 20's and 30's group once again, as well as an active group of Third Agers. The Sunday school program is bursting at the seams. And new men's and women's groups are getting off the ground.

How do we nurture and sustain this renewed energy and enthusiasm that's permeating our community, particularly in light of the rector's upcoming sabbatical? That's the question the Vestry and Officers wrestled with at our annual fall retreat last weekend.

We came up with three answers. First, we need to stay focused on the fundamentals. Second, we need to make room for new creative energy, so it doesn't get crowded out. And third, we need to be better stewards of our human resources, so they don't burn out.

To achieve those objectives, we are setting the following priorities for the coming year, based on what we have heard from the congregation in a variety of ways, including the Strategic Planning process, last year's Parish Survey, discussions at Shrine Mont this past summer and during the Canvass dinners this Fall, and other opportunities we've had for dialogue and reflection:

1. **Restructure Sunday morning worship services.** Worship is at the center of our life as a community. Our goal is to make Sunday services as meaningful and accessible as possible. To that end, in August, we asked the Worship Committee to gather input from the congregation and make recommendations to us by the end of February. We plan to act on those recommendations next spring, so that any changes can be firmly in place before Paul leaves on his sabbatical next August.
2. **Expand and enrich small group activities.** In any large congregation, the main way that people get and stay connected with each other is through small groups. This is especially true at St. Mark's, where our rich tradition of adult Christian Education has produced unusually deep and lasting connections. We are determined to maintain that tradition, but to do that, we will need to find ways to make small group activities more accessible to families with young children and busy lives, and to the two-thirds of our members who don't live on Capitol Hill. We need to continue to come up with innovative and flexible approaches, such as the recent Canvass dinners and the classes meeting on Sunday mornings. We plan to promote further innovation over the next year, while paying close attention to which approaches are most inclusive and satisfying, so we can replicate them.
3. **Simplify the administration of church programs.** Currently, we spend the first several months of every year recruiting, often begging, people to fill the 270 leadership positions required to run church programs. And the number of jobs to fill is going up every year. Meanwhile, the people in these positions are burning out at an alarming rate. We have discerned that much time and

energy is devoted to meetings that may not be very productive, that are focused on activities only loosely related to our core functions, and that we continue mainly out of habit or tradition. We need to be better stewards of our human resources. To that end, the Vestry plans to simplify its own processes by using meeting time to focus only on what's most important to the parish and that can only be done face to face. For other work, we plan to use e-mail. We also plan to help the Pillar heads as they streamline their own programs, get focused on what makes the biggest difference in their areas, and eliminate unnecessary meetings and structures.

4. **Conserve clergy and Senior Warden meeting time.** Our clergy and Senior Warden are the most vulnerable to getting overloaded and burned out, so we need to be better stewards of their time and energy. This is a particular concern as we prepare for Paul's sabbatical. To address this concern, we plan to pilot a system that limits meetings involving the clergy and Senior Warden to Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, beginning this spring. We also plan to set priorities for their meeting time. Other groups will still be free to meet on those nights or at any other time, but they cannot expect participation from the clergy or the Senior Warden.
5. **Evaluate our space needs with an emphasis on supporting core church functions.** In the next few months, a subcommittee of the vestry plans to re-evaluate our relationships with affiliated groups that use space in our buildings to determine how closely they relate to and support our core functions. The subcommittee will also analyze where and when space conflicts occur. The reality is that our Sunday school program has been growing for the past couple years, and we have run out of classroom space. Moreover, many families in our parish have difficulty attending church functions on weekday evenings, and there is demand for more meetings to take place on Sunday mornings. Our support of children and families is one of our highest priorities. Hence, we will consider whether space currently being used for less core purposes could and should be converted to classroom and meeting space. We will make a decision early next year on whether any reallocation of space is needed.

We hope that these changes will reduce some of the complexity and stress that have crept into our communal life, and allow us to deepen our connections to the church and to each other. We realize that these changes may evoke anxiety and discomfort for some of us. We are very mindful of the need to honor where we've come from and to preserve the essence of who we are. But, we are also called to be good stewards of the present and to make room for the next generation, helping all of us find ways to develop the deep connections to the church that will sustain this community for years to come. We will offer the community ample opportunity to be involved in our discussions about these issues, to provide feedback and input, and to voice concerns. We look forward to working together to ensure that the very best elements of our communal life are preserved and strengthened.

### **2005-2006 Vestry and Officers**

Paul Abernathy, Rector (*chair*)  
Shearon Williams, Assistant Rector  
Michael Townsend, Senior Warden  
Charley Donnelly, Junior Warden  
Stewart Andrews, Vestry member  
Rod Lawrence, Vestry member  
Julie Murphy, Vestry member  
Burton Reist, Vestry member  
Susan Thigpen, Vestry member

Dave Willson, Vestry member  
Eileen Blumenthal, Vestry member  
Lisa Sotir Ozkan, Vestry member  
Margaret Wood, Vestry member  
Hank Donnelly, Register  
Pete Carlson, Treasurer  
Gardner Van Scoyoc, Human Resources Chair  
Jack Burton, Manciple