

**State of the Parish Address**  
**St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, Virginia**  
**7 December 2008**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

Good Morning! As I reflect upon the year ending, I am struck by how much our cup at St. John's is blessed to overflowing. This is a "state of the parish" address, and I can say to you with gratitude and joy that the state of God's parish at the corner of Jefferson & Elm is very, very strong. More than anything else, we are about making disciples for Jesus Christ. Everything else I say today is footnote!

A quick statistic: Our average Sunday attendance at worship has increased by a full third in the past year, from 317 in 2007 to 419 this year. The attendance numbers alone might not mean much, but this increase in attendance at worship has been coupled with an increase in involvement at all levels of parish life. We are growing in Spirit as well as in numbers.

This morning I want to share with you a few examples of how this is so. I want to begin by saying there's no way I can cover everyone and everything. (I have to get to church by 11 a.m.!) There are so many faithful people doing so many faithful things at St. John's. Please accept my overarching appreciation for **all** that you do.

There are the choir, the handbell choirs, and the children's choir. These serve not only to lift our voices in praise to God but also as communities of grace and support within the parish.

There are behind-the-scenes ministries including the Welcome Committee, our ushers, Pastoral Care, Parish Life, the Funeral Reception Team, the Altar Guild, and our parish office volunteers, who all serve as the Marthas in our midst. The rest of us experience St. John's to be a place of hospitality, rarely realizing the countless hours these and other groups give to us.

Another major component of our parish life is outreach. In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus ultimately asks two questions: "Who is your neighbor?" *and* "What does it look like to be neighborly?" Our outreach ministries at St. John's, sparked anew this past September by Bishop Michael Curry of North Carolina, are striving to respond to both these questions. *Who are our neighbors?* They are the homeless, at-risk youth, the mentally ill and elderly who live in our housing facilities, those facing financial disaster, and even our distant brothers and sisters half a world away in Ghana. *What does it look like to be neighborly?* Neighborliness is characterized by selfless giving, by expressing not consternation or judgment but rather empathy for those who are hurting. It means taking joy in the joys of others and shouldering the others' burdens. Our outreach ministries are doing all of these things, and if you've not joined one of

them yet, I hope you'll do so now. Today I am announcing our third annual Outreach Challenge. An anonymous parishioner has agreed to match up to \$10,000 for our outreach ministries. Any extra check you write to St. John's in the month of December and designate toward outreach will go toward the match. So get out your checkbooks!

A year ago in this address I announced to you the creation of a new Sunday evening worship service and Christian formation program called the Gathering. The Gathering would be something different in both style and philosophy. The liturgy would remain, of course, distinctively Episcopal, but it would also draw from rich aspects of our tradition beyond our Prayer Book alone. The music would consist primarily of traditional hymn lyrics, but these would be played by instruments including guitar, hand drum, and violin, and at times the hymns would be set to new tunes. The Christian formation component of the Gathering would support our stellar children's choir program (thank you, Mike Milam!) and also offer a "one-stop shop" for evening Sunday school, youth group, and more intentional and in-depth Christian education for adults. In addition to all this, every Sunday would include a fellowship meal.

This entire endeavor was risky, but the response from both our parish and the broader community has been faith-filled and remarkable! We now regularly see between 120 and 150 people at the Gathering each and every week. The evening has an energy about it that is both invigorating and contagious. I want to make mention of three people without whom the Gathering could not occur. The first is Carter Brothers, who along with a fantastic band that also includes parishioners Sam Darby, Janet Lynne Knopf, Brad Knopf, and Nancy Page, prepares our music each week. Carter's faith and dedication are inspiring. The second and third are Katherine Knopf and Liz Frankl, who have spearheaded our Gathering Meal Groups that are working in close tandem with Sara Brooks' always fabulous Parish Life team to provide attractive and delicious meals each Sunday evening. Katherine and Liz developed this idea and were proactive in implementing it. They've made the Rector's life a little easier, and I thank them for it.

There are other new ministries at St. John's. Our Dodson Dinner & Lecture received a jump start by Wendy Moore and her team this past October, when Dan Matthews riveted us with his talk. Next fall Marcus Borg will be our speaker. And Foyer Groups, coordinated by Shirley Kingery's committee, are providing fun-filled, casual dinners so our parishioners can get to know one another more deeply. Eighty-two parishioners are participating this fall. You can sign up for the next round of Foyer Groups in February.

If you've been here on a Sunday evening and you've wandered through the third floor, you've likely heard the commotion coming from our youth room. Through the incarnational ministry of Youth Coordinator Mary Stafford, and with the leadership of Jen Brothers' Youth Discipleship team, our youth group has grown from a handful of kids to an average of 25 each week. St. John's youth group is becoming a place where kids who aren't even members here want to be. It is not exaggeration to say that our youth team is forming our next generation of Christian disciples. It's awesome. The same goes for our Sunday school program, which has been much helped by the new service schedule we implemented this fall. On both Sunday morning and Sunday evening, lively kids are learning about God's love through the mentoring of Lisa Graves, Nikki Dandridge, and a committed team of teachers.

We all know that the Reverends Chip and Lisa Graves are heading soon to St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Crystal Lake, Illinois. Our loss is St. Mary's gain, to be sure. We will miss Chip and Lisa, and we will gather on Wednesday evening, December 17, for a potluck and celebration to honor their lives with us. I also want you to know that we have a team in place for the spring. You will read about them in more detail in the Record that will arrive in your mailbox this coming Friday, but let me announce them to you by name at this time.

The Rev. Erin Hensley and the Rev. Tom Mustard will be joining us as new priests on staff. Erin graduated from seminary with Chip and Lisa. She is young, energetic, and deeply spiritual. Tom recently retired as the rector of St. John's-Bedford but has decided he's not ready for full-time retirement! Tom is known to many in Roanoke, having served both Christ Church and St. James earlier in his career. Additionally, The Rev. David Dixon has joined the staff as deacon coordinating pastoral care. And Erin Harden, who is an elementary school teacher and was raised at Christ Church, will join us in a part-time capacity to coordinate our children's Christian education program this spring. Mid-year we will hire a full-time Minister of Children, Youth, and Families. I'm excited about the new team, and I hope you are, too.

This new team will come on board as we begin our much-anticipated church restoration and renovation project. Our last Sunday worshiping in the church will be December 28. On Sunday, January 4, you'll arrive at church to find this parish hall transformed into sacred space. We will work deliberately to make this a reverent and holy place to hear the Word of God and celebrate the sacraments. We will be out of the church for approximately nine months, and when we reenter it next fall, we'll all be wowed at how the historic beauty of that most holy space has been restored and enhanced. Please keep your capital campaign pledges current, so our work is unimpeded!

In closing, a few words about the current economic situation. Things are difficult for many, many people. And because the current economic meltdown began in the financial sector, it actually affects Episcopalians more than more conventional economic downturns might. Stocks are down; credit is tight.

Reflecting upon the current situation, one of your fellow parishioners offered this: “We have all been here before. In every society and civilization, there is a time when spending and financial speculation come to an end. It usually coincides with a religious revival, because people begin again to trust more in God than in the economy. Greed is usually replaced with integrity, frugality, and oddly enough, generosity. Instead of thinking what is best for the individual, people become more altruistic... That’s when we realize God’s love never fails. Economic cycles come and go but the love of God, which is in and around us, remains.”

Truer words have never been spoken. The ministry of this, your parish and God’s, has also never been more important. We are reaching the lives of both our own parishioners and of people in need throughout the community in ways we haven’t in a long time. And in the current economic environment, these needs only increase as anxieties increase.

All that is to say, I invite you to take this time as a time for renewed prayer not of *what* or *how much* you give to your church, but *how* you give it. Too often, the treasure we designate for the church is last on our list, and when circumstances get tight that’s the part that goes unfulfilled. And yet, the model in Scripture is that the *first fruits* return to God. Giving to God’s church in this way—off the top, before any other considerations are made—is liberating in the most profound way. When we begin truly to conceive of our parish budget in this way, then our ability to fulfill Gospel imperatives to one another and to the lonely and the lost is assured. We need never have an anxious Finance Committee meeting! And these considerations couldn’t be more important than they are this year. With our obligations to one another and to those in need in our community, with the Spirit-filled momentum we are experiencing, we need every pledged dollar and every additional gift to actually come in to the church.

Returning to the words of that parishioner, “This is the perfect time to come to God and ask his guidance, seek his presence, and acknowledge his sovereignty. Eventually [the economy] will sort itself out, but if we make time to place ourselves under God’s bidding, we will discover that our faith and human spirit are stronger than the economy. Because faith, hope, and love endure forever.”

They do indeed, and they abide here at St. John's in abundance. As I said, we are about making disciples for Jesus Christ. All else is footnote. Thank you for all you do for your parish and for me. Serving as your rector is my life's blessing. I'm glad you're here!

*Amen.*