

This past week I watched the President's State of the Union address. And he unveiled a new motto that he used as a theme for the speech, and that he's been using ever since, "An America built to last". Now, I know that this is just a political slogan and it will probably be gone and forgotten in a few weeks. But it did make me think, that perhaps a good theme for our parish for the coming year is "a church built to last".

Now what do I mean by that. Well, we certainly belong to a robust institution. The Christian Church worldwide has been going strong for 2,000 years and has grown every one of those years. Our own Anglican branch of the Church, while suffering some setbacks in recent years in some places, is still growing by millions of souls every year all over the globe. We just have to get used to the reality that in the 21st century a typical Anglican is a black African teenager instead of a white middle-aged Anglo. The demographics are changing dramatically, but the two-billion strong and growing Christian Church and the 80 million strong and growing Anglican Communion are doing just fine and are well positioned for the centuries to come. And this should be no surprise to us. After all, the truth of gospel, the saving power of Jesus Christ, and inspiration to mankind of the Holy Spirit go a long way to insuring the success of the Church, no matter how much we humans make a mess of things. So the Church worldwide, both in its totality and in its Anglican expression seems to be very much a Church built to last.

But what concerns most of us is not the worldwide Church, but our parish here at St. Luke's. Well I can tell you that there are good signs for our parish, as we work on making a parish here that is built to last.

Opening the Doors of Our Parish

In 2011, we made a deliberate effort to make St. Luke's a greater part of the St. Albans community. We've opened our doors to a variety of community groups for meetings, classes, and events. We've hosted groups from the school system and the recreation department. We've had events for seniors and youth. We had a major part in the last local Christmas festival as we hosted Santa Claus and hundreds of local children for the Santa's workshop. We've even welcomed our four legged friends by hosting a dog and puppy obedience class. I want to express my thanks to Bryan and Dale Powers, our Sextons, who are constantly being called on to reconfigure rooms and furniture for various groups. Many of these groups made donations to the parish that, at the very least, covered our expenses, so they overall helped our budget. But far more importantly, they are getting the word out that St. Luke's is an integral part of the community and is a congregation ready to welcome those who seek our hospitality.

Combined with our other community events such as our book and bake sale, our rummage sale, our lawn sale, the Salad Lunch, and the art show we had in September, there have been many opportunities for people from the community to come into and doors and find out what St. Luke's is about.

This past year we also opened our worship space for a series of concerts. In the summer, we welcomed the Canadian band The Olympic Symphonium, and at

Christmas we hosted the Vermont Choral Union for a wonderful program of sacred music. And this past fall, we hosted Keeghan Nolan and her friends for a fundraising concert to benefit the victims of tropical storm Irene. These concerts were special because they brought people into our beautiful and sacred worship space, and let people get some feel for what it might be like to worship our Lord in this place.

And speaking of Irene, many people in our parish also made individual donations of supplies and money to help the victims of Irene, as well helping the victims of the spring floods at Lake Champlain. In those spring floods, in addition to our donations, some members of our congregation were grateful recipients of that aid as well.

Capital Campaign 2012

Opening our doors to our community is an important piece of our efforts to spread the word about St. Luke's and inviting the community to support, and be part of our parish. And we're going to need that support. In 2011 we celebrated the 150th birthday of our church building. In 2012 we plan to launch a major capital campaign to repair and refurbish our building so that our physical plant can itself be built to last. For this campaign to be successful, we will need to look beyond our current congregation for support, to those who have been our friends and supporters in the past and the present.

During February, I will be naming a capital campaign committee and we will begin interviewing consultants with the goal of contracting with one of them to help us launch and run a successful campaign.

Current Building Projects

There are some building projects which we felt were too important to wait. This past month we performed some much needed maintenance on our bells and replaced the electronics that run the bells with a modern computerized system that allow us to play hundreds of different tunes with relative ease. Some of you may have already noticed the Westminster chimes that now play on the hour. And it will be easy for us to play hymns and other music appropriate to a season or an occasion. We can now offer the bells to the community in ways we have not been able to in the past. For example, if requested we could play an appropriate tune on the bells for a wedding taking place in Taylor Park. It is our hope that we can use the Bells of St. Albans to serve all the St. Albans community.

The vestry has also agreed to replace the coverings on the stained glass windows at west end of sanctuary. This will make our church much more visible at night, especially from Main Street and Taylor Park, and will make those beautiful windows much more visible from both inside and outside the church.

I wish to thank Rich Hamilton, Donna Veale, Mark Kalbfleish, and Jeff Young for their leadership on these important building projects.

Worship

Of course, when you're a church, the building is a place where you do your work, it is not the work. Our work here is to worship God, and our Lord Jesus Christ, to learn about him, grow in him, and invite others to do likewise.

To this end I want to thank everyone who is involved with our worship: our acolytes, lectors, chalice bearers, musician, our amazing altar guild, and our deacon – all of whom contribute so much to making our worship meaningful, beautiful, and hopefully pleasing to God.

The Importance of Being Present

Many people work very hard every week to make St. Luke's a special place to worship. And I want to stress that as Christians, we have a duty to be in church every Sunday we possibly can. We have a great core group who are here virtually every Sunday. We also have several people who, while members in good standing, we don't see nearly as often as we'd like. If everyone who is on the active membership roster of this parish all showed up on the same Sunday, we'd have about 80 people at our 10:00 service, instead of our usual 35 to 40. And about 20 of those would be kids. And we could easily have 40 at 8:00 instead of the usual 20 to 25. I want to remind everyone in the St. Luke's family that having a church built to last begins with showing up – for the good of our parish, as well as the good of your soul.

Adult Education

We come to church to worship, and also to learn. I'm sure some of you have noticed that one of my great passions is teaching. And I want to thank those who so faithfully show up for Bible study each week. And I remind all of you that we have a Bible study from 9:15 to 9:45 most Sundays. We also had a well-attended Lenten program this past year, which I hope to repeat this year.

Beginning in next couple weeks, we're going to have a winter film series – where we will show a movie on an evening followed by a discussion. I'm certainly open to other educational opportunities, as I rarely pass up an opportunity to teach.

Youth Education

On the youth front, many of you have expressed a desire to have a bigger Sunday School program. We are very grateful to George Murphy for the work he has done and continues to do with our admittedly small Sunday School.

Building a Sunday School is always a chicken vs. egg proposition. We need to have a program to be able to attract families with children. At the same time, to build a full-blown Sunday School program requires a considerable investment in recruiting and training volunteers, acquiring curriculum and supplies, and allocating space. We are hesitant to make this investment without a commitment that the students will be there.

However, if the need is there and if the students start showing up, we can ramp up a full-blown program relatively quickly – within a week or two.

Now we have a number of children on the roster of this parish who are of Sunday School age. If the parents of those children will commit to show up, and enroll their kids in Sunday School, and attend regularly, I will make sure we have the program for them. But I don't want to waste people's valuable time, and the parish's limited resources. We need the parents of this parish to make a commitment to Sunday School, and then this parish will also make that commitment. And once we get things rolling, it will be a wonderful avenue for growth and fellowship, and for building a church that built to last.

A Variety of Ministries

St. James in his epistle said that faith without works is dead. We are not judged by what we preach but by what we do. One of the great things about our Episcopal Church is our emphasis on living out our faith in the ministries in which we participate. There are so many people here who give so much in support of others – whether directly through the parish, through outside groups, or on their own.

I don't have time to even begin to address the great work done outside the parish by our people, but I do want to acknowledge some of the important ministry done in, and in the name of, St. Luke's. I've already mentioned those who work to make our worship meaningful and special. I also need to acknowledge and thank our hospitality committee, our wardens and vestry, our convention delegates, those who help with the buildings and grounds, our counters, those who worked on our various events, and those helped with flood relief – from two floods – this past year. Also, those who donate food and cooked for Martha's kitchen, those who donate to the poor box, those who, in the name of the church, visit the sick and the shut-ins, or give rides to church to those who need transportation. And for much of this pastoral work we need to acknowledge someone who is a tremendous gift to this church and to all of us, and whose leadership and example are an incredible inspiration to us all – our deacon Jim Ballard. Thank you Jim!

A Call for More Involvement

There are many people here who work very hard to make this parish run, and to fulfill our mission to proclaim and live into the Good News of Jesus Christ. Some of them have been working hard for a long time, and some really need a break. All of us have gifts and talents that the church needs and can use for good purposes. I want to encourage everyone in our parish to be as involved in the work of our church as you can be. The more hands we have working here, the easier, and more fun, the work is for everyone, and the more we can accomplish. If you haven't been too involved in our parish beyond Sunday morning, please prayerfully consider making a commitment to becoming more involved. We welcome new ideas, and new energy. And we can better serve our Lord when we're all involved in the effort.

Facing our Challenges

This year we're beginning a four year countdown to the 200th anniversary of the founding of our parish in 1816. Two hundred years ago, our founders created a parish that was built to last. They created a strong faith community, eventually built this incredible building, and gave us traditions and a character that so far has carried us through 196 years of ministry here in Saint Albans.

Now we have some challenges, our community is smaller, our bills are bigger, and in some circles our faith is under attack. But the long history of this parish is a history of challenges – big challenges, some of which threatened the continued existence of the parish. But our history is also a history of overcoming all those challenges, and we're still here. And we're not going anywhere.

Please remember: We don't have any challenges that we can't grow our way out of. The way to restore our church to its glory is simple – more people need to find us,

be welcomed by us, and decide that this is the church community they want to be part of. If that happens, we can easily start planning for our next 200 years.

No priest can do that on his own. No vestry can do that on their own. It's going to take all of us working together, and committed above all else to prayer, worship, and ministry. A parish family committed to setting aside their own individual will and doing the will of God together. This has always been how the church survived and flourished. A group of people coming together and saying, "not my will, but your will be done." That's what brings God's blessing on our work, that's what brings people into our parish family, that's what builds the church – a church that's built to last.

Thank you!