

Annual Report of the Priest-in-Charge - 2009

The Senior Warden's Annual Report provides an excellent organizational overview of 2009 accomplishments and 2010 opportunities. Organizational health is vital. We Episcopalians are an incarnational people, i.e., we believe that God acts in and through humans and human institutions. This emphasis has roots in our belief that in Jesus God's love took human form, revealing God's unconditional, unfailing love for the world. This parish's very name, the Church of the Nativity, emphasizes that incarnational theology.

However, organizational health is not the whole story. The Church is unlike any other organization. Only the Church claims to be the body of the risen Christ, i.e., together as the Church, you and I re-incarnate God's love in human form. This unique identity gives the Church its two-fold purpose.

First, the Church should help us to love God more fully. Nativity's strong tradition of worship enhanced with quality music (adult and children's choirs, bell choirs, organist/pianist) has continued this year in spite of financial difficulties. Many others – acolytes, lectors, lay Eucharistic members, altar guild members, ushers, greeters, oblation bearers, volunteer cleaners – have also enriched our worship. Altar Guild funds enabled us to repair several badly worn items of altar ware, purchase and install an aumbry light, replace the processional cross, etc. Proper items in good repair express the importance of worship; aesthetics help us to experience God's presence in worship. Adhering to the set hours for worship and having a "user friendly" bulletin has made our liturgy more inviting to non-Episcopalian Christians.

Second, the Church should help us to love others more fully. God calls us to feed the hungry spiritually and physically. Thus, in addition to multiple continuing efforts to assist the needy in our community and globally (especially in Honduras and Uganda), Nativity in recent months has made a more concerted effort to welcome visitors and to incorporate them into the life of the parish. In 2010, I hope that Nativity will begin to reinvigorate its efforts to feed the "hungry" locally and further afield.

It is not enough to love strangers; we must also love one another, a love embodied in our strong pastoral care programs. We pray for each other. We break bread at Nativity's altar together, we break bread in Corlett Hall together (fellowship hour, Shrove Tuesday, potlucks, etc.), we break bread in one another's homes (Foyer, special events, and individual invitations) – we are always eating together, a very good thing for everything but diets! We listen to one another's stories through hospital and sickbed visits, through Caring Connections, through pastoral counseling, through our pastoral care providers – in more ways than I could enumerate even if I knew them all. Truly, Nativity is known by its love for one another.

Our Christian education and spiritual formation programs undergird both purposes. Nativity's Sunday School and youth program utilize dynamic, attractive curricula that engage students in the learning process. Parents, children, and youth all tell me that these programs are a significant aspect of what drew them to Nativity and sustains them as part

of the Nativity family. Adults continue to attend programs as diverse as Centering Prayer, Blue Candle, Education for Ministry, and the Faith Science Dialogue in very good numbers.

Measuring spiritual health is notoriously difficult. However, average Sunday attendance and giving are two good indicators of a congregation's spiritual health. Both have stabilized, perhaps even starting to trend up (alternatively, that latter assessment may reflect my natural optimism!). In 2010, for the first time in years, Nativity began the new year with a realistic, balanced budget.

2010 bodes to be an exciting year in Nativity's life. Early in the year, the Vestry, after receiving input from the congregation, will decide upon and implement a search process for Nativity's next rector. The Vestry will also make a decision about proceeding with the new building, a decision that first Mother Diane's retirement and then budget issues delayed. Construction financing is in place, plans are in hand, and the climate right for obtaining a favorable construction bid.

Concurrently, every Sunday I have at least one and often several people tell me that they sense a fresh spirit moving at Nativity. I think that they feel God's spirit, the Holy Spirit, moving. Communication and transparency have improved; new people now share in our various ministries, missions, and parish life s; new initiatives are beginning to percolate.

Presently, the Church of the Nativity is in the largest 15%, perhaps the largest 10%, of all Episcopal parishes in the U.S. as measured by average Sunday attendance and budget. The demographics of our North Raleigh / South Durham location position this as a parish primed for continuing growth. With a new rector, this 800 member congregation can, if it chooses, easily double in size over the next seven to ten years.

Nativity is truly a God-soaked place. I pray that this parish to continue to be a place in which the thirsty drink deeply of living water, the hungry are fed the bread of life, all of God's children find a warm welcome, and people love their neighbors near and far. Thank you for having allowed me to minister in your midst the last seven months, for that service has enriched and deepened my own journey.

God bless.

Fr. George