

## *Our Transition to Leadership*

7 Easter - June 1, 2003 - Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close, Grace Church, Haddonfield

The Christian Church is dependent upon the gifts of the Holy Spirit. How do those gifts appear, and how do they get used? William Willimon, in his commentary on the reading from Acts today, says the Church is a human community. It also depends upon the gifts of many people. The Good News is that God provides the resources that we need ... us! Our call is to fulfill the demands of discipleship in our time.

Last Thursday, we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension. Jesus ascends into heaven to sit at God's right hand. What happens to the disciples is that Jesus leaves ... again! The joy and excitement of the Resurrection are replaced by the confusion and anxiety of the Ascensions. Jesus tells them to wait in Jerusalem. Something else is going to happen. It's another delay, another pause, another time of transition in the life of the early Church!

What do we hear then this Sunday? Here we are, caught between Ascension and Pentecost, and the story we have from the Book of Acts is a boring account of a church election! Now we can identify with this since we just elected a new bishop for the Diocese of New Jersey. Most elections aren't that exciting are they? Note also how Matthias is chosen to replace the absence created by Judas' death, they cast lots! I'm not sure that's the way we want to do elections around here either!

There is something we can learn from this account of Matthias' election. It tells us something about leadership. The major New Testament function of leadership is continuity. The disciples are chosen to continue the work of Jesus. Matthias is chosen to help fill out and continue the community. Matthias is a sign to us. He shows us the early church, the disciples, moving towards the reconciling work of Jesus Christ and the importance of the faith community. He also reminds us of the dual nature of Church leadership. There is a link with the past ... that we often call "tradition." And there is an adaptation for the future ... we call this "innovation." Both are needed for the Church to be a meaningful and effective community.

Grace Church finds itself at a crossroads today. We are challenged with how we will be disciples of Jesus and the Church right now. How will we deal with the tension of tradition and innovation? There is always the danger that we will let our emotions and ourselves stifle the work of the Holy Spirit. We have our own particular challenges facing us today. We have been concerned with the budget ... how will we pay to get things done around here? We worry about volunteers ... who will do the work? There are staff changes facing us. Mother Renee has been appointed to work in Atlantic City. On one hand, that's good news, when we lose all our money at the gaming tables, we'll have some place to go! But it is our loss. Karen Marshall will be leaving this summer to seek full-time work. How will we conduct education and youth ministry when these people leave? How do we maintain the momentum and positive changes we have begun? How do we continue to reach out with the message and vision of Grace Church?

The biggest problem facing us are our own attitudes of defeatism, apathy, indifference and inaction. You know these comments. There are the negative voices of "we can't" and "we'll never." Then there is that classic Episcopal response we confront over and over again, "We've never done it that way before." One parishioner told me recently that it is Grace Church's legacy not to pay our bills. Is that the legacy we want to live with as a parish? Another parishioner told me we need another angel. She meant we need someone else to provide us

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money like Galdys Johnson who left us million dollars ten years ago. But no one like that appears to be on the horizon. Some say we are doing too much. Others say we are doing too little. Where are we in all these conversations?

The reality is that God doesn't give up on us. Why are we so quick to give up on God when things don't go our way? What's needed in our time of transition is transformation. We can learn from the lesson of this period between Ascension and Pentecost. Jesus tells his disciples ... wait! While we wait here ... we can pause to reflect, to talk, to listen and to plan. This is a time for us to prepare for action. Our call is to serve, not sit and complain.

We worry so much about outcomes. The work we have been doing with the Gallup organization points out a learning to us. We will not be able to make the needed changes in the parish if we focus just on outcomes. Those general outcomes are attendance (who shows up); membership (who signs up); and, giving (who antes up). Gallup urges congregations that want to make a difference to focus on the causes of spiritual health. They have helped us to identify the things we can look at that will influence the outcomes. Gallup says look at spiritual commitment, our individual beliefs, and congregational engagement, how the individuals interact with the parish. New responses are needed here! We are one of a few Episcopal churches who are using the Gallup method. We are on the leading edge with this work. The new learning new thinking and new ideas are helping us to see how we can make a difference at Grace Church.

Our call is to prepare to do the day to day work of the parish. Ascension tells us that Jesus is not here to do it anymore. We are the servants. We are the ones living here in this place now. It's up to us to do the chores and get the work done! The good news from Jesus is that help is on the way! That's the story of Pentecost that we will hear next week. But right now, we have to get together and do the work. It's time for us to be leaders. We are called to be Jesus' witnesses. We are to be the disciples. At Grace Church, it's time that we began to live into our mission of service, education and worship. This is the essences of our mission statement developed last year. We can utilize our work with Gallup to help us accomplish the needed work.

Many ideas have already come forth from the parish this year alone. One new couple to our community brought us the pot pie fundraiser idea. It helped us raise money for outreach. Our goal was to raise \$1,000 for the Cathedral in Trenton. We not only met that goal, but surpassed it! We will use the rest of the money raised for another outreach project. One parishioner has brought us an idea to generate electricity for our buildings using a new photoelectric system. It will help to lower our energy costs significantly!

Some people have discussed possible groups to utilize our space as renters. Others have talked about forming small groups. One person wants to build upon Mother Renee's "spiritual gifts" classes to help us identify people's strengths. Still another parishioner is excited about ways we can do stewardship at Grace.

We are gaining insights from many places. The work we have done with Gallup teaches us to focus on spiritual health. The key to that is engagement. We are learning to ask questions differently. If you visit with me something, I will ask you three distinct questions. "What do

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you like to do?” “What do you do best?” And most important to me, “What will you do for God?” The real business of the Church extends beyond our Sunday morning gatherings. We are called to do ministry day-to-day. The election of Matthias we hear about today reminds us of this. He was an answer to prayer and a new leader for a new age. Matthias completed the circle of disciples for continuity and brought innovation to midst to prepare for ministry in the future. The disciples were transformed ... now it's our time to be transformed.

So what's next for us? Anthony Robinson wrote an interesting article entitled “Lessons in Leadership in a December, 1999 issue of Christina Century. He noted six value points that we need to remember as we move ahead at Grace Church. First, we need to ***GIVE RESPONSIBILITY BACK***. How many times have we heard people say, “someone ought to be doing this.” Robinson response is, “sounds like God may calling you to do this.” It's not the clergy, the staff or a few volunteers' responsibility to work alone around here. Each of us, by virtue of our baptisms, it called to do something. It's time to restore the laity's baptismal ministry.

Second, Robinson says ***EXPECT TROUBLE***. Conversion means that we have to give up one belief for another. This will create conflict. Conversion is not an easy thing. One wise priest told me, any time you begin a change in the parish, open the front door and the back. Some will come in and others will need to go out. Third, it's important to ***VALUE SMALL STEPS***. A long range plan and vision are important, but we will need small steps to get there. Remember the widow's mite and the mustard seed? These were small things by themselves, but they respected something bigger in the larger picture. One-to-one conversations and small groups are invaluable. Fourth, Robinson says ***DON'T OVERVALUE CONSENSUS***. Somewhere along the way, the Church adopted the mistaken notion that everyone has to agree before we do anything. We don't need everyone to agree in order to act. The parish doesn't need to get everything voted on. Remember Matthias? They cast lots to choose him, not hold a congregational meeting and vote! Fifth, it's important to ***COUNT THE YES VOTES***. Another mistake the Church often makes is spending all or most of its time with nay-sayers and the negative people. This is deadly. It creates paralysis and we spend too much time on these few people. Gallup says draw on the strengths in the parish. Look to the people who are engaged and happy and learn from them. Gallup also says that with very negative people you only have three options: convert them (nearly impossible); ignore them; or move them out. Note everyone will be ready to move when the parish makes decisions. Finally, Robinson noted the need to ***BE PERSISTENT***. Change always provokes resistance. Don't give up. Remember who you are serving and why!

All of this is about following Jesus. We are called to be his Church, not our image of a church. Jesus calls us to be transformed! We are to be on the move, adapting, changing, not just warming the pews. Today's lessons remind us that we are all called to be leaders. Jesus also makes us some promises. He says he will be with us. Jesus says that help, the Holy spirit, is on the way. But we are still called to fulfill the mandate to ***BE THE CHURCH***. At the end of John's Gospel, Jesus says to the disciples that he is sending them out. Now it's our time to be sent out. May Gob bless us as we live into being leaders for Grace! Amen.