

**PENTECOST 2006 - June 4, 2006**  
**Gifts for the Mission Church, The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

*“Christ has no body now on earth but ours, no hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion looks out to the world; ours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; ours are the hands with which He is to bless people now. Christ has no body now on earth but ours.” (Teresa of Avila, 1515-1582)*

**Pentecost is the feast that celebrates the birth of the Church. Here we are 50 days after Easter! What is it that we like about birthdays? Let’s see, there are cake, ice cream, balloons, a party ... and GIFTS! Yes, gifts. What are the gifts that we have received on this special day? Pentecost talks about the gift of the Holy Spirit. Easter gave us the gift of new life in the Resurrection of Jesus.**

**Our faith is centered in gifts. Genesis talks to us about the gift of creation. The Exodus talks to us about the people of God, and the gift of community. At Christmas we celebrate the gift of Jesus, God incarnate. It’s no wonder that Paul talks about a variety of gifts. He was speaking to the Church in Corinth who had forgot the many gifts that God had given them. Paul also says that everybody has a gift!**

**What gift do we have here at Grace Church? Our vision statement is printed in our bulletin. Have you read it? It says our vision is “growing through grace” ... grace is a gift. It is the gift of God’s unconditional love. Do you think anyone could use some unconditional love? God’s grace has been made known to us in Jesus Christ. He brings us love, hope, forgiveness, acceptance and more!**

**This gift is not dependent on who we are, what we do, or how much we have. It is a free gift! Look around you ... look at the gift of Grace Church. We have the people here, the building, the mission and the vision. We have the gift of each other! What are we doing with these gifts?**

**Yesterday, the Vestry met for its annual mid-year retreat. We took a look at the five-year plan. It was a chance for us to talk about how we are using the gifts God has given us. Do you remember Mayor Ed Koch of New York? He use to go around and ask citizens of the city, “How am I doing?” Yesterday’s meeting was our chance to ask, how are we doing.**

**There were several points we considered. First, we looked at the vision, growing through grace. We talked about how we might measure our progress in this area. We came up with lots of indicators. We felt that we are on the right track! Next, we considered the buildings and grounds. This was a plus. There are more groups using the space than ever before. Just last week we hosted the high school music department banquet. Elizabeth Haddon Elementary School utilizes our parish hall for meetings. The music school is our biggest space user. We have a new memorial garden along the Church. We have almost recovered and rebuilt from the flood damage of last fall. People in town still comment that we have a “pretty church.” We are doing a good job here.**

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Next, we talked about education. This was a plus with room for growth. We have great kids programs, but we want to do more for adults. Don't miss the Pentecost special program in the parish hall today! We talked about finance... and there's good news there! We have money in the bank, we have paid our bills and stewardship is on the upswing. We still have challenges facing us, but there is good growth here. We have started a fund to hire an associate and may be able to do so in two or three years.

Next we talked about membership. Another plus! Look around; there are lots of new faces! Our average Sunday attendance is climbing. We know we can do more here ... but we feel good about the strides we have taken. Next we talked about parish life. Wow! What a plus-plus! There are many good things happening here! May 6<sup>th</sup> we held the Fiesta de Amigos with St. Andrew's of Camden. We had great food and drink, great dancing (provided by the young people of St. Andrew's) and lots of dancing! We have a host of things coming up: the parish picnic, the summer supper club, movie and theater groups and more! Jessie Orland said, "We like to greet, we like to meet and we like to eat!" Take a look at the pictures in the parish hall of our May events!

Perhaps the best thing we have been doing this year is outreach! This was a plus-plus-plus! We raised \$1750 for Camp Faith with the flower sale and Mother's Day Fund. We raised \$1750 for St. Andrew's at the Fiesta! The golf tournament netted us \$5,000! Jason Miller, our junior warden, was cornered at Starbucks last week. The man commented, "Boy, you guys are busy! There's always something happening there!" Now that's good and important. People around us are beginning to see what we are up to!

This is all good news. But as we continued to talk, we saw that there was room for growth. We asked ourselves, what are the biggest parts of our plan yet to be tackled? One area is leadership. The old formula of 20% of the people doing 80% of the work still applies here. Where is the variety of gifts for the common good? Maybe we need to bring back the gift classes we had three years ago. They helped people to identify their gifts and then figure out how to use them to build up the Church. We need that kind of effort again.

Then we talked about the dreaded "E" word ... evangelism! Our first response was silence! The reality is that many people in our town don't know who we are or what we stand for! Why are we Episcopalians so afraid of sharing our faith? Too many of us were taught to "live" our faith but not how to "talk" about our faith! Are there others who might need to hear about the grace of God? Yes! Are there others who might need to know there is a place that emphasizes the unconditional love of God? Yes!

What was the first thing the disciples do on Pentecost, the birth of the Church? They talk about Jesus and God! They proclaim the Gospel! Here's the model for

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**us! Do we have something good here? Yes! Why don't we talk about it? Are there others that need to hear from us? Yes! What keeps us from sharing? If it is fear, then let's trust the Holy Spirit and take a risk. Are we afraid of saying the wrong thing? Just speak in the language you know. Draw on your own experience as a starting point. Are we afraid of coming across as "holier than thou"? We don't have to be judgmental and self-righteous. All we have to do is share what we know, what we feel and why we are here.**

**How many times have we heard, "I live my faith, I don't talk about it." ... Well, that's just great. The Church is dying because of our silence! We are letting other voices speak for us, and we don't agree with many of them! How many of you here this morning are baptized? Almost all of us! How many of you are confirmed? Come now; let's see those hands, good. Most of us. We made vows when we were baptized and confirmed. We will repeat those vows when we say the Baptismal Covenant ... we promised to proclaim by WORD and deed the good news of God in Jesus Christ!**

**Erasmus, the famous Renaissance scholar, told a story designed to emphasize how important it is to take up Christ's ministry and proclaim the Good News (from James Moore, "What Do You Do With Such A Gift?"). Jesus returns to heaven after his time on earth. The angels gather around him to learned what He did on earth. Jesus talks about the miracles and healings, his death on the cross and the Resurrection. After he finishes, Archangel Michael (our patron saint) asks Jesus what happens next. Jesus says, "I left behind 11 disciples and a handful of men and women who followed me. They will declare my message and express my love. They will build my Church!" But Michael answers, "What if they fail? What is your other plan?" Jesus said, "I have no other plan."**

**Jesus expects us to carry on. We are the ones to spread the Good News. We are the ones who have to talk it up. We're not alone; we have the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Vestry identified yesterday that we have a great many gifts. Now it's time for us to make use of them and carry out the mission to be the Church. How might we do this? All it takes is our telling our story. We can start by asking ourselves: Where have we met God recently? Where have we experienced love? Why are we here in Church today? This is our starting point.**

**If we believe our vision, that we are people growing through grace ... if we believe grace is the gift of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ ... then we must take up the mission! We are called to tell the story of Grace today! Let's start being part of the effort to grow the Church! May the Holy Spirit help us!**

**Christ has no body but ours ... Christ has no voice but ours ...**

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