

FOUNDER'S DAY
Celebration of the Feast of St. Michael & All Angels
October 1, 2006 – Grace Church – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Today is cause to celebrate! We are 164 years old! Grace Church was established and opened on September 29, 1842. This is our feast day, St. Michael is our patron and we give thanks for this place we call our Church home. We transferred the celebration to today so that more of us could be gathered. Just think about the gift we have been given! Look around at the buildings, and the people. This is what has been entrusted to us! We need to ask ourselves, “What does it mean to have this gift?”

What a remarkable place we have ... with a patron that is an angel! St. Michael is that winged figure in the stained glass window behind us. Angels are the messengers of God. They come directly from God with a message for us. We see over and over in the Bible that the angels are greeted with fear. Do you know what the first thing the angels say to us humans, “Fear not”? Then comes the message, and the expectation that we will be part of God’s plan for all of humanity!

What does it mean to be a trustee? There are years and years of people who have gone before us. They have left us this place and expect us to carry on. What will we leave for those who come after us? What gift will we pass on to not only our children and grand children, but also generations from now?

I learned first hand this week about what it means to be a trustee. A friend of mine, Frederick, died suddenly. I have known him for more than 20 years. He has a disabled daughter who is 30. Now I have responsibility for Janet. I have known her since she was a little girl. I made a promise to Frederick years ago that I would watch over her. I didn’t think much of it when I made the promise, but now the time is here. I have a legal responsibility ... but more than that, I have a moral and Christian responsibility. Now, I’m a trustee.

We are trustees here and now of Grace Church. It’s easy in this day and age to lose sight of what’s expected of us. We often forget our responsibility. The world tells us to take care of ourselves, to look out for number 1, and (the most obnoxious one to me) “God helps those who help themselves.” Nowhere in the Bible does it say that these are the ways expected of us.

What do we have here, right now? We have these Church buildings and this community. We have the presence of the Holy Spirit. We have care and compassion. We are named Grace, and those means we have the gift of God’s unconditional love in Jesus Christ. So here we are, in this place, at this time with these people, living in the gift of grace. So what are we going to do trustees?

As many of you know, I serve as Dean of Camden Convocation. I need to tell you my service is not marked by great triumphs. I have witnessed the failure of others that too easily could become ours. First, there is Our Savior in Camden, closed and the property sold, along with Trinity, Delair, closed and up for sale. St. Wilfred’s, in Camden, Atonement, in Lawnside, and Trinity, in Magnolia, only can afford supply priests. St. Augustine, in Camden, and Good Shepherd, in Berlin, has gone from full-time ministry to part-time. St. John’s in Chews Landing is still looking for a priest, and I keep wondering, “Who’s next?” How far are we from dying? From becoming part-time or closing? Some of us would be happy to just let things go. I’m sure

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all these places gave no thought to closing. They just satisfied themselves with little thought of the future or the role of a trustee. Are we going to be trustees who just hold onto to things until people stop coming? Are we going to do something to make sure we have a future?

God has richly blessed us with Grace, now it's our time to step up and be responsible. Are you pledging to provide for the financial support of this church? If the answer is no, start now! If the answer is yes, thank you, and by the way, are you tithing? If the answer is no, start! If the answer is yes, thanks, and have you remembered Grace Church in your will? If the answer is yes, thanks! If it is no, please contact your lawyer today (there are also a couple of lawyers with us today!). Are you providing time and talent by volunteering? If the answer is no, start! If the answer is yes, thanks, and what program, activity or group would you like to help start?

To be a Trustee is to be someone who acts not for his or her benefit, but for the benefit of another. Our Church is a living, growing thing. Are there any guarantees that we will continue? No, but our commitments will make a difference. Every living thing requires attention, nurture, commitment and support. What are you doing to help Grace Church grow? Here are some things to think about: you can invite a friend to worship; help with a program; pay up your pledge; attend an educational offering; and, a host of other things.

I have a dream of seeing Grace Church be the best church in this community and the Diocese. When I first came here, nearly ten years ago, the only comment I heard about us was, "Grace Church is that pretty church in town." Some of you may be satisfied with that ... I'm not. What about the people in the church? What are we known for doing and being?

A parishioner shared a conversation with me just the other day. She said she was with people of another church in town (which shall go unnamed). They were discussing the life and ministry of their congregation. One lady held up our newsletter and said, "Look what Grace Church is doing to help Mt. Pisgah (remember they had a fire and now they meet weekly in our auditorium) ... why can't we do that?" Then the lady pointed to the Sunday school registration, "look at this from Grace, we can do that!" She went on to mention the 5K Run, the Blessing of the Animals and the October fest ... and commented that if Grace Church is doing this, then why can't they be doing similar things. Now we are more than just a pretty church, we are the beautiful people who are setting an example for others!

We are 164 years old. What's next? As a trustee, we have to ask ourselves what responsibility and what actions are expected of us. We have established a vision for ourselves, "Growing though Grace" and this points us towards the future. How will each of us help Grace to live into that vision?

My goals are probably well known to you. I want the beauty of our people to surpass the beauty of the buildings. I want us to be known as one of the warmest, most friendly and most inviting places people have ever been. I want a Church when people can come an experience a God moment (or more!). I want a church where Jesus is taught, lived and shaping the world. How will you help this happen trustees?

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Last week, at the funeral, a couple of people came to me after the service and asked about becoming members. Yesterday, at the wedding, people shared that they would like to join. Last night at the 5:30 service and today, at our services, we will see an average of four or more guests. People are looking for God, they are looking for a relationship with Jesus Christ ... and they are hearing about Grace Church. The angels have brought us a message to be the Church in this place and at this time. We are the people called to carry the Good News into the rest of the world. So ... how will you trustees help this happen? Remember, fear not! We've got lots of help behind us! So ... what's next?