

Grace Episcopal Church
2009 Rector's Report
The Rev'd Dr. D. Jonathan Grieser

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." St. Paul, Romans 8:38-39

I added those verses to the signature line of my email when I began receiving and sending email to members of Grace Church. I did it not because I thought I needed some pious platitude, but because Paul's words here express one of my deepest values and one that I hope will come to characterize Grace Church in the coming years. We exist as a congregation because of God's love; we come together to experience God's love, and we are called to share God's love. God's love should shape everything we do as a congregation.

I've been at Grace just over three months. That's enough time to learn a great deal about the workings of the parish, to recognize that there remain enormous gaps in my knowledge of Grace, and to regret already not having gotten to know most of you well enough. My first weeks were focused on nothing more than getting oriented to things, learning my way around the building, the finances, the administration, and getting to know the staff and lay leadership.

I continue to be grateful to Patrick Raymond, whose interim ministry at Grace was grace-filled. I know there were some tensions during his tenure; I know as well that there were a number of things that he hoped to accomplish that were left undone but I am amazed at the Herculean effort that he expended. And I'm sure there were times, where like Hercules, Patrick was cleaning out a stables. I will say about his gifts to Grace, that I probably would not have accepted the call to Grace had I not immediately sensed how much Patrick had done.

Of course, Patrick accomplished nothing by himself. He assembled a capable staff, beginning with Financial Administrator Janet Lubniewski, who accomplished astounding things on her own. And Patrick and the staff were surrounded by gifted and committed lay leaders, beginning with the Senior and Junior Wardens and members of the vestry who worked hard and often with great personal cost to keep Grace functioning and to develop new policies and procedures. The foundation that was laid during the transition period provides a solid basis on which to build for the future.

I am also deeply grateful for the hard and compassionate work of Deacon Carol Smith. Her commitment to pastoral care is an enormous blessing, especially in these early months while I have been learning about Grace and its parishioners. I will admit, however, that there is a downside to her deep involvement in reaching out to those with pastoral needs. It has meant I have turned to her when I should have taken the lead. I also appreciate the commitment of our dedicated band of Eucharistic Ministers who take the sacrament to our shut-ins each week.

Last week, we had a marvelous celebration. Our wonderful choir, under the expert direction of Berkly Guse and Organist Greg Upward guided our worship with music from Kodaly's Missa Brevis, and after the service, we all celebrated at a coffee hour honoring the cooks of Grace over the years. Many people said to me on Sunday, and throughout the week that it was the first time, in a long time, that we were having fun at Grace. Thanks be to God! And let us look forward to many more joyous occasions of this sort in the future.

I don't want to take a lot of time to talk about finances. We are not out of the woods yet. Much depends on a successful conclusion to the Stewardship campaign, but my goal is that our 2011 budget will be balanced. With hard work, dedication, and commitment from our whole congregation, that goal is well within reach. We will be working to develop a year-round stewardship program that helps members and friends of Grace understand the importance of their financial commitment to our ministry and the role that financial commitments play in one's overall life of discipleship to Jesus Christ. In addition, we are working on developing policies and procedures for the use of our restricted funds, and will present at next year's annual meeting, a plan for consolidating some of those funds into a single endowment fund that reflects current realities and understandings of the use and maintenance of such funds. As part of this process, we will be producing new information about planned giving. The Grace Fund, which was established to provide ongoing financial support for building maintenance, will also

Grace has been through a great deal over the last years, but I think it's time for us to recognize that what lies in the past, will remain there. It is time to move on. But movement needs to have focus, direction, a goal or goals in mind. To that end, in the coming months, I will begin the process of helping us think together about who we are, that is to say, what our core values are; why we exist, in other words to develop a mission statement, and finally to begin thinking about where we need to go, how to put that mission into concrete form, through a visioning process. For this effort to be successful, it will require input from all of us, deep reflection on our congregation and our context, and some wild brainstorming.

Grace will celebrate an anniversary in 2014—175 years of Episcopal worship in Madison. In fact, two recent anniversaries went almost unnoticed. At least people were aware that 2009 marked the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the food pantry; but no one has mentioned to me that 2008 marked the 150th anniversary of the dedication of the nave. Be that as it may, in 2014, we will celebrate 175 years of Episcopal worship in Madison and as we look forward to that event, it provides us with a golden opportunity to begin thinking about what we want Grace to be in five years. By our annual meeting in 2010, I want us to have in place a mission statement which all of us shared in crafting, and more important, a vision that looks forward five years to that anniversary, with a plan that articulates concrete steps in how to make that vision a reality.

Assessing our Ministries. It will also provide us the opportunity to reflect on our current mission and ministry priorities, to evaluate them and perhaps to develop new programs. The 30th anniversary of the Food Pantry seems an appropriate time to take a good hard look at the pantry

and its role in the larger community. How can we make it better, how can we reach more people and provide them with the necessities they lack? How can we move beyond being a bandaid--and after 30 years, it seems the pantry is far beyond being that--and begin to advocate for those in our community with food insecurity?

A similar evaluation is necessary for the Hispanic Ministry, which as you know has been at Grace Church since 2002. But the relationship of that ministry to Grace has never been clarified. That effort at clarification will be a top priority in the coming months. I will convene a task force made up of representatives from that 12:00 service as well as leadership from other constituencies at Grace, to develop a plan for the future of that ministry. We will work closely with the Diocese and with Peggy Worzalla, the Bishop's assistant for Congregational Development, to create a viable future for that ministry.

Strengthening our community. Among the hard work that had to be done during the transition period was a concerted effort to strengthen the bonds that unite as the body of Christ. Programs that were put in place last year—foyer groups, for example, are off to a good start again this year under the capable leadership of Terry, Chere, and Gerry—Terry and Chere Gibson, and Geri Naymick. There is still room if you would like to join with fellow parishioners in conversation, fellowship, and good food. The GIFT program this fall was a great success and brought together members of the 10:00 and late service around a common meal and a common formation program. In consultation with staff, and participants, we've decided not to continue it for the rest of the year, but it did bring us together. The coffee hour last week was also an opportunity for us to come together as a congregation in fellowship. But we need to do more.

One piece of that effort needs to involve my getting to know parishioners outside the confines of this building. To that end, I am asking today for six or eight volunteers, to host in their homes small groups of no more than ten people in the coming months. I have a sign-up sheet here. After you've signed up, we will coordinate the schedule, then solicit people to attend.

Grace “on the square.” I would like to say something about an idea that is just beginning to take shape in mind. It comes out of my brief experience living and working on Capitol Square, and my experience with people who come to visit Grace on Saturday mornings. Grace Church has been a landmark on the square for 150 years. In recent years, it has not been a part of the square. Residents of Madison who come in on Saturday mornings invariably begin conversation by saying, “I've been by this church hundreds (or thousands) of times, but I've never been inside.” What I want us to think hard about in the coming months is making Grace a place of spiritual respite in the midst of all that goes on around us. What that might look like, I have no idea. Certainly, it means opening our doors, and probably much more often than for a couple of hours on Saturday mornings. But it also means offering programs that might be of interest to people who live and work downtown, and above all, offering worship at times other than Sunday morning.

In the coming months you will also see me taking a more active role in the community life of Madison. One of the first things I did when I arrived was join Downtown Madison, Inc, and I expect to become involved in various programs and committees. A couple of decades ago, a book entitled *The Naked Public Square* bemoaned the waning significance of religion in public life in the United States. Now, when we hear about religion in the news, it is most often about a sexual or financial scandal, or about religious people who have said, or done, outrageous things. I hope that Grace can become for Madison a place where people can learn and experience a different side of religion or spirituality, serious, progressive, explorative and that as a congregation, we can take a lead in articulating this alternative in our community.

I have laid out an ambitious program, a lot of ideas; I hope some of you will be energized by one or more of them, and will take a lead in shaping these ideas and others into programs and activities that will make Grace a more vibrant, inviting place for all people. I hope too, that when we come back together next fall for our annual meeting in 2010, we will be able to measure progress toward the goals I've laid out, and have an even more ambitious set of goals for the next five years.

Finally, my brothers and sisters, let us take to heart Paul's words in the Letter to the Philippians:

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Phil 4:8)