

**4 Epiphany  
January 30, 2022  
Annual Congregational Meeting**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

Today is the occasion of the Annual Congregational Meeting of St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church. This sermon is my report to the congregation, and then following the service of Holy Eucharist we will convene to elect Mission Board members, Delegates and Alternates to the 2023 Diocesan Convention, and we will present the 2022 Budget.

Last year's Annual Meeting was virtual ... only worship leaders, camera crew, and a few others were present in the church. Vaccines for COVID-19 were just beginning to become available, and many of us were trying very hard to obtain an appointment to receive our injections. Today, almost all of us have had our two vaccinations and a booster shot, yet here we are again ... our Annual Meeting is virtual. This COVID-19 coronavirus just won't quit.

For the most part, members of St. Cyprian's have stayed healthy during these trying times. That is the good news. The bad news is that we are all very tired ... exhausted ... of masks, social distancing, avoiding crowds of unmasked people. We are all ready for this to be over, yet we still have a way to go. For much of 2021 we thought we were on a track toward a new normal ... worshipping together as long as everyone was vaccinated and wore a mask. Then came Omicron, and here we are ... a community once again dispersed in our own homes rather than worshipping together in this sacred space of St. Cyprian's.

All that being said, 2021 at St. Cyprian's was an exceptional year ... and it was made exceptional by your generosity and stewardship. Your contributions are much more than just the financial donations you made last year to the ministries of this congregation, but also the gifts of your time, your talent ... and most of all ... your spirit.

Let me begin with our finances ... they tell a story in their own right. Our Annual Operating Budget for 2021 was \$173,800. That was supported by your fulfilled pledges of financial support, unrestricted gifts, and revenues from weddings at St. Cyprian's. However, for 2021 your generosity exceeded those pledges and gifts by over \$13,000. We were also able to reduce our expenses during the year by almost \$10,000, leaving us with a surplus at the end of the year in our Operating Account of \$23,000!

As if that weren't enough, you also gave to other specific ministries to enliven St. Cyprian's mission in this corner of God's vineyard ... Beyond the Commons, Dining With Dignity, the Ecumenical Food Pantry, Habitat for Humanity, Afghan Refugee Resettlement, and more for a total of \$73,000 in addition to the monies designated for the Annual Operating Budget.

I cannot begin to tell you how exceptional this is. In “normal” times, most congregations do not collect the full amount of their pledges of financial support. People’s circumstances change ... they move away, they lose a job, they get a divorce, they become ill, they die. So, the pledge of financial support that they made at the beginning of the year has to be reduced to meet the new circumstances. Although, members of our congregation faced some of these same life situations, others picked up the slack, and we exceeded our goals.

Articles in the Religious News Service, the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Living Church, and other publications report the loss of revenue facing churches large and small because of the consequences of the COVID shutdowns. That, in turn, makes the generosity of the people of St. Cyprian’s all the more remarkable.

As extraordinary as the financial numbers are, I believe you know they are just one of the currencies of the ministries in this congregational community. Behind the financial generosity supporting various programs are so many of you who make them happen. For example, when our in-person activities were limited by COVID, Dining With Dignity began handing out take-away dinners for the homeless men and women in the area. Tommy and Katie Cash, along with Barb O’Donnell and Diane Griffiths would put the Subway sandwiches, Diane’s fried chicken, drinks, chips, fruit and more into bags and deliver them to our unhoused sisters and brothers at the distribution site at the corner of Bridge and Granada Streets. Then the leadership of Dining With Dignity was passed to Ivan and Linda Kish, Hugh and Linda McClelland, and Gail Wisler and Bill Brown. For a while, we resumed serving a buffet type meal. With the help of the youth from Pioneer School, and students from Pedro Menendez High School, we had well over thirty people donating, preparing, and serving a delicious meal.

The same generosity of time and spirit was true in our ministries with the Ecumenical Food Pantry, the Wildflower Medical and Dental Clinic, Operation Hew Hope’s Ready4Work program, and Episcopal Relief and Development. When St. Augustine Habitat for Humanity invited St. Cyprian’s to become a sponsor, Jim Vande Berg found an anonymous donor to get the ball rolling with a \$2,500 matching gift ... and the congregation made the match and more ... raising over \$5,000. When the United States military pulled out of Afghanistan, and refugees started arriving in the U.S., the Racial Justice Initiative stepped up to raise funds and purchase supplies for three families being relocated to the Jacksonville area.

For me, this is a true example of what the corporate “Body of Christ” really means ... a community of faith where everyone contributes and supports each other’s efforts. Even those who may feel like they are on the sidelines are fully a part of this shared ministry. Your prayers, your gifts, donations of food and warm clothing and blankets, even your donations of empty grocery bags for Dining With Dignity, is a blessing for those in need.

What usually brings us together ... as the corporate Body of Christ ... is our Sunday worship, but COVID has made that difficult. A year ago we were worshipping by YouTube Live with just a few people in the sanctuary ... me and Pastor Deena, Kathy Vande Berg and a few singers, and a

rotating crew operating the camera. Then on Easter we re-started in-person worship with a beautiful sunrise service, and later a 10am festival Holy Eucharist in this space.

It felt good to get back together, even if we were masked and socially distant ... well as socially distant as we could be in this tight space with people who hadn't seen each other in over a year. Through the late spring, summer, and fall it felt almost normal. As we began our Advent season the Choir returned, and we even had a beautiful Lessons & Carols and Christmas Eve service with a congregation.

Then came Omicron. We suspended in-person worship in early January ... and it felt to me as if the wind went out of my sails. Once again, we are operating with a very small crew of dedicated people trying to minimize our exposure ... for all of us ... to this highly contagious disease.

However, YouTube Live has actually been good for us at St. Cyprian's. We have people worshipping with us virtually around the country ... even around the world. A few weeks ago, I received an inquiry about a sermon from Igor who lives in Croatia. The Rt. Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler, the new Bishop of Wyoming, watches our service from time to time. People in England, Nova Scotia, and Montreal have commented on our worship service, as well as parishioners who have never been to St. Augustine. There are people in at least fifteen states who worship with us virtually on a regular basis.

And the same is true of our Zoom meetings ... Racial Justice Initiative, Aging Angels, Virtual Coffee Hour, Centering Prayer, and Reading Between the Lines. People in Maine, western Pennsylvania, and Colorado regularly participate. And these are your ministries. I lead Reading Between the Lines, and sometimes attend the Virtual Coffee Hour, but the rest are organized and led by you ... the people of St. Cyprian's.

One of the less visible yet very necessary and highly effective ministries that supports all this is our Communication Team. Missy Colee manages St. Cyprian's web site. Mary Beth Martin edits and produces our weekly email newsletter, The Voice. Katie Cash oversees our Facebook page, even while she is in Maine. And Holly Horahan, St. Cyprian's Office Manager, handles the calendar and many other details. These four people coordinate the various pieces needed for our virtual worship service, Zoom meetings, and many ministries to be available to all of us. Their gifts of talent and time enable the many ministries of this congregation to thrive in the midst of this pandemic.

This past year was a time of transition for many at St. Cyprian's. It is as if COVID brought into focus life-changing decisions for a number of folks who have moved from St. Augustine to be closer to their families. Pastor Deena Galantowicz, my dear colleague and friend who rescued St. Cyprian's after the schism in 2006, retired from her role as Pastoral Associate at the end of October. And, from late summer through the fall Caren and I spent three-and-a-half months on a sabbatical traveling in our motorhome with our two dogs, Micah and Karma.

Our sabbatical ... after thirteen years as Vicar of St. Cyprian's ... was restful, renewing, and re-creating. We drove fourteen thousand miles and passed through thirty states. We visited scores of churches ... many with programs and activities similar to St. Cyprian's. In the Diocese of Florida St. Cyprian's is somewhat of an outlier. What we discovered as we traveled affirmed my belief ... St. Cyprian's is not an outlier in the greater Episcopal Church.

While we were on our sabbatical, St. Cyprian's worship was led by several clergy ... Pastor Deena, Mal Jopling, Andy Zeman, and Michael Moore. And it was as if the congregation didn't miss a beat while we were gone. The opportunity to sponsor Habitat for Humanity, and the Racial Justice Initiative responded to the crisis in Afghanistan by sponsoring three refugee families moving to the Jacksonville area are examples of the extraordinary leadership at St. Cyprian's.

Which brings me to the subject of the Mission House renovations. This is a multi-year saga. Our original plans were creative, innovative, spacious ... and expensive. A search for a contractor was interrupted by COVID. We narrowed our choices to one contractor who retired before we could sign a contract. We modified our plans and found another contractor, but then came the permitting process ... and it has taken months. I was hoping that I would have good news to share this morning that the City of St. Augustine's Building Department had given us the go-ahead ... maybe next week. The good news is that we have architectural plans, a contract for the renovation with Generation Homes, and it is merely the bottleneck at the City's office that is slowing us down. We will see construction starting very soon.

As we move into 2022 St. Cyprian's continues to boldly and compassionately live out what it means to be the Body of Christ. There is an old adage that in a church twenty percent of the people give eighty percent of the money, and eighty percent of the work is done by twenty percent of the congregation. This is not true at St. Cyprian's. People are generous with their resources ... financial, time, and spirit. You care for each other. You pray for each other. When one person suffers, others suffer with them ... that is the meaning of compassion. When one person rejoices, we all rejoice together ... that is the meaning of community. That is how the Body of Christ manifests itself.

We all know too well, how this COVID-19 coronavirus has tested the health of individuals, families, and the cities and institutions that support them. The response to this pandemic has become political and tested even our states and our nation. It has certainly tested us in this community of faith. Yet, with God's help, we have not just survived the test, but we have responded in ways that increase our health. It has shown us the real meaning of the corporate Body of Christ in this place. It has reminded us of the gifts that have been bestowed upon us ... large and small ... that are to be shared for the common good ... for the sake of a loving God who made us all.

St. Cyprian's is a healthy community of faith boldly and compassionately living out what it means to be the Body of Christ. May we live that blessing as we move into 2022.

I close with a quote from Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus:

*Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine:*

*Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever.*

***Amen.***

**Amen.**