

PASTOR'S ANNUAL ADDRESS

This is our 185th Annual Meeting. We have been here at this spot in the center of Somers since 1835.

During the years of the Mexican war, the Civil War, World War One and Two, the Korean War—over those years of our history we buried many parishioners killed in wars, and who were veterans of those wars, the last of whom was Richard Hadad, a veteran of the Korean War. We are in what seems like an endless controversy, both medical and political.

We have seen lots of changes in our parish, much of which is documented in our Parish History book, recounting many struggles and many successes. We have seen both struggles and successes this past year. In the Fall of 2019 we welcomed twenty-four new people to our congregation. We seemed to be reaching for the top of our game. The Vestry had just been able to raise me from half-time to 3/4 time, which was the first time that we had a priest who was more than half-time in six years. It felt like we were on a roll.

On January 12, 2020, just over one year ago. Bishop Dietsche was here with us for a joyous worship experience where he received and confirmed fourteen new parishioners. The following week, I had a double bypass surgery, and the following week a stroke and a seizure, and thank God we had Duanne Simon (we managed to catch her healthy between her surgery of 2019 and her surgery of 2020), Canon Jean Person, Mother Lynn Harrington, our current Vestry, and all of those of you who came to our aid to keep this parish going. We got a second Bishop's visit of the year in February on Ash Wednesday, when Bishop Glaspoole came to be with us. We were so lucky during that time to have such great support as I was recuperating. My first Sunday back in the pulpit was March 15, and the following day we had to shut down worship, and suddenly to convert to live-streaming with only six people—me, a Eucharistic minister without Eucharist, our two Altar Guild chiefs (Dorothea and Pat), and Joyce and Lester. Six people. Your Vestry continued to meet via this new thing called Zoom. Janet had to work mostly from home, and I was back and forth from home to here at the office, occasionally sending youtube videos from the prayer garden across the street from home. We had to find a totally new way to do church. We had to shut down two very important ministries, the Thrift Shop and 12-step meetings, for which we normally house eleven

meetings each week. Miraculously, we found a way to keep feeding the hungry—more on that in a moment.

It was not until the first Sunday in July that we could re-open our church, and shortly thereafter our Thrift Shop. With limited capacity for indoor seating, and with the wonderful video and technical assistance of Doug Abdelnour, we were able to seat some others outside in a tent loaned to us and put up by Eric and Even Hough. Having communion in our seats, not at the altar rail, and with no wine, felt different, but we made do. Our Bishop continually pointed out that our Hebrew forefathers were in the desert for 40 years, and then later in slavery in Babylon for 50 years, so, if even sadly, we could still survive without communion for a few months. Yet, we were the only Episcopal parish in Northern Westchester County to reopen in July. Others attempted opening, and then closed again. The only other one currently open for live worship is St Matthews in Bedford. All of us have suffered.

I got to take the longest vacation of my entire adult life in October—thanks so much for that. I re-connected with family and old friends and visited places to which I had never travelled. I got to go to Elvis Presley's home in Memphis, Tennessee, and spent a whole day with my younger brother at the honky-tonks in Nashville where most country western singers got their starts. I also got to sleep outdoors in my tent, sometimes in the mountains and sometimes near the beach, which was refreshing and renewing for me.

During all of this time, I kept hoping for us allowing more people by the time of Advent, but the opposite happened—churches in the area were closing. We have persisted, and are still hanging on. You have heard in the reports that preceded that pledges are down, plate offerings are down. We are attempting to re-open a limited number of our twelve-step meetings. Those groups have been paying us full rent for all of 2020, despite not being able to use the space, other than bringing lawn chairs to our parking lot during warmer months. We are deeply grateful to have them, and hope that we can begin hosting more of them. We are deeply grateful for those who are continuing to pledge, both in time and in treasure. Some of you have even increased your pledges, but this next year will still be financially challenging, and growing our ministries will be difficult.

Even though this past year has been extremely tough for St Luke's, I am sure there

were many more difficult ones in earlier years. We survived those and we will survive this one. Yet we are still not back to where we were at this time last year, and will likely not be able to worship with all of us here for at least another six months. So, first of all, hang in there; second of all, thanks to those of you have continued to come, to share your talents and treasure and good will, and to participate in our ministries.

Our Thrift Shop has been a bright spot. Despite being closed from mid-March to late July, the profits were over \$26,000, because of the devotion and dedication of Dorothea, Pat, Vivian, Helen, Janet and Pete, and Mike Basille and Bob Mundy hauling donations in and out of the building.

One of our greatest accomplishments of the year is this—while people in Somers were hungry, we increased our ability to feed them. The year began, and then continued, with some really painful and difficult changes in the way our Food Pantry had to operate, but we faced them with what I like to say was awkward and difficult “grace,” emerging to a point to which we have now transitioned—a beautiful new pantry, with new leadership, new willing and excited volunteers, and lots of generous new donors of both food and money to buy food. We must thank our Vestry, and particularly Lynda Magrath and Karen Kellogg, and all of the new volunteers, for that.

Feeding the hungry—feeling the need to connect with one another—finding ways to connect with one another—these three things were the essence of Jesus; these three things are the church. If there is a potential benefit from the hardships of this past year, those three things are the benefits. And I believe those three things are St. Luke’s, and the things that will be the strength of our return to normalcy, whenever that happens. We are going to have continuing challenges—more people in our parish and around our Somers community will still be hungry, be ill and more will be dying. You have continued to try to be Christ in the community, and I am trying to be a pastor to the town. There is a distinct possibility that we may be required to shut down again, but we will still find a way to be church—I promise you that. Being your pastor these past two plus years has been a lot of things for me, but the prominent thing that it has been for me is the joy of getting to know and love each and every one of you in more and different ways. That will not change, no matter what happens with you, with me, or with the world around us.

Now is not the time to lie down, give up or give in. Now is the time to roll up our sleeves, get a vaccination, put on a mask, disinfect our hands and our hearts, dive in, stay working and build the beloved community we all want to be, for all who enter our doors. If the center of God is everywhere, then everything and everyone is of central and divine significance. Sometimes we know in our heart the words of the poem from Emily Dickinson:

**“If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain.
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin,
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.”**

God bless you all.....go in Peace to Love and Serve the Lord. Thanks be to God....Alleluia!!!

Michael T. Watson, Priest-In-Charge