

Annual Rector's Report for 2020
Submitted to the Annual General Meeting
31 January 2021

Beloved Brothers and Sisters at Church of the Good Shepherd:

I hope all of you understand when I report that 2020 was like no year in ministry that I've ever encountered. It was an incredibly full year, with gripping news events and restrictions on movement and gathering that faced us all with a sudden need to adapt. In the midst of these challenges, though, there have been blessings and gifts and opportunities that have been unique to our mutual ministry in this place in a year full of uncertainty and grief. I have now been Rector of the congregation in pandemic longer than I was before the pandemic, which is a strange and surreal thought, but I continue to be amazed at all the warmth and grace that is shared among us, even when we cannot be in the same place. Always, but especially in time of need, it is up to us who recognize this gifts to respond with our best and brightest efforts to serve one another and the whole world as Christ has taught us. Following the pattern established in the Scriptures, my life and work here is about 'arming the saints for the work of the kingdom', that is, providing the people of this parish with the opportunities and resources necessary to do the work that God is calling you to do. Below is an outline of the ways that I have worked to do so.

Worship and Fellowship: Worship is at the very center of everything that we do, where we gather to celebrate God's presence among us and encourage one another in our various ministries, according to the patterns of prayer and sacrament that we have received. This year, for the first time perhaps ever, our regular sacramental worship was interrupted for some time, as we were prohibited access to the church for some months, including most of Eastertide. We nonetheless have adapted our worship to be able to include weekly online worship and as many opportunities for in-person worship as the situation and season would allow for. During this time, we implemented plans for the reopening of the church for in person worship, but have yet to have the opportunity to fully implement them. In addition to online worship, we have worked to gather together for fellowship as part of our weekly worship, and on occasional feasts or commemorations that give us a chance to share something of the fellowship that is so essential to our life here. Through the warm months, we managed a few in person events with distancing protocols. While this year has been notable for its challenges for our ability to worship together, we have adapted well and continued to faithfully meet every week in relatively undiminished numbers.

It has been a wonderful blessing to be able to include Deacon Greg and Deacon Nancy in our worship leadership and planning this year. Their insight and enthusiasm have been wonderful to include in our common prayer and praise. We have worked together with a Worship Commission to identify ways to adapt and grow our worship life together. Unfortunately, much of our progress was thwarted by the pandemic, but we will look forward to some ideas that we hope will revive and diversify our worship together in a way that is both welcoming and innovative.

Mentoring: As I indicated above, it has been a delight to be able to work with my clergy colleagues here, and to welcome Deacon Greg onto the team. It was a very rewarding experience to go through the search and selection process and to have our hard work fulfilled midyear with a new curate. Since his arrival, Greg and I have meet regularly to

help introduce him to ministry, to this congregation, and to the community around us, all in a time of isolation and insecurity. I am always happiest when I'm able to work collegially with a team that shares a common vision and is energized by the same spirit, and I'm grateful that our relatively new team here has bonded so quickly.

In addition to our new curate, we have a candidate for ordination in Michael Reinke who has been working to discern this call and preparing with long hours of education and prayer. It is a joy to see the Spirit at work in our congregation calling people to new ministries, and a good barometer for the health of a Christian community. I continue to provide mentoring for other clergy and those in discernment as needed, mostly continuing with existing mentoring or Spiritual Direction relationships this past year rather than taking on new ones.

Administration: This past year has continued to be a time of transition for the congregation in terms of our administration. We have welcomed a new Curate, and I've seen my first full cycle of church events and festivals. The learning curve for these communal patterns takes time, and this year, so many of our regular patterns have been thrown into disarray. We have done a good amount of work to adapt to new ideas and systems, but for the most part, we have been stretched by the need to adapt that the past several months have consistently presented us with. I am very grateful to a staff that always goes the extra mile to make sure that things are done well.

Pastoral Care: Apart from our worship, my time and effort are mostly directed toward pastoral care. I work to be available to everyone, most especially to members of our parish family, but also to people in the community and the wider church. Visits have naturally been difficult to arrange this year, but I have been allowed to be with people during many of the most critical times, and have found some creative solutions to be able to visit with people in other cases. I have been very glad of the help of the vestry and other clergy in constantly reaching out to the whole congregation by phone, email, and letter, when we have been unable to meet in person. There have also naturally been increased needs for help with balance, mental health, elder care and child care since the pandemic began. The need for clergy services with local funeral homes was increased this past year as well. In colder months, the need of the homeless and helpless in the downtown area has become painfully clear.

Education: Our parish education programs have continued, even in the midst of pandemic, and we have settled into a pattern on Sunday mornings and throughout the week that seem to have worked for a fair few people. They have included Bible study, discussion groups, private and group prayer, a weekly fellowship forum and periodic special events. Our youth programs and Sunday school have continued to meet through the pandemic to offer fellowship, worship and education to our younger members. The bishop inaugurated a diocesan school for ministry this past year, which is intended to help prepare people for ministry who cannot undergo the traditional residential training graduate course that is usually required for priestly ordination. I have been teaching an Anglican and Episcopal History class for the finalist cohort, and have been a regular teacher and mentor at the monthly gatherings of the school. All of our meetings this year have been online.

Stewardship: Financial, Ecological, and Facility: This past year, some major strides were taken to bring our physical plant into better security and repair. This included a large project to upgrade our security and surveillance systems, and some long-deferred

maintenance on our HVAC system. While our building use was down, support from our congregation continued throughout the closure, and we were able to economize many regular building expenses. Our green team has picked up momentum and we hope to have projects that will help to keep costs down while minimizing our environmental impact in the coming year.

Wider Church and community ministry: I have continued to work with other congregations and dioceses to prepare, teach and preach on issues where I have a strong interest or background, like ministerial formation, literacy, environmental theology and scientific theology. I have also worked to strengthen relationships with partners on a global scale, which have included relational work with the Tariro mission to orphans in Zimbabwe, and laying the groundwork for future visits from colleagues from Durham and Canterbury cathedral, as well as the Community of the Resurrection.

I continue to be very involved in developing our local ecumenical and interfaith relationships. This past summer I was nominated and elected as the Vice President (and presumptive future president) of the Nashua Area Interfaith Council, and I worked extensively with local efforts for local witness and prayer through the Council and its partner agencies.

Personal: I continue to work to balance my call to serve here with my call to serve within the larger church, and to balance my life with the parish family and with my personal family, and while the course has been incredibly challenging this past year, I am generally pleased with the results. The pandemic has put me into a better discipline for personal care and health, and has revitalized my contemplative and intercessory prayer life, which I devote time to each day. Hope and I have been challenged as most parents have with the school situation, but we decided to home school from the summer forward and the results have been very positive. I certainly value the work of teachers with a renewed appreciation as I see how much time and effort it takes to teach. It has been challenging to guard time for Sabbath and to get away, but I think that has been common to many in the season of COVID. I feel like I am well nourished by what I do, and I feel fairly treated by this community; mostly I feel privileged to be able to serve in such a wonderful place among such loving people. I am deeply grateful to the Vestry and our Task Force for their tireless efforts, and to our wonderful staff and deacons. My ministry here is blessed by the work of countless dedicated volunteers, all of whom give selflessly in order to help the congregation live into its full potential for ministry and service. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve among you, and my life is blessed and enriched by the love that we share in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "J. B. Priest". The signature is stylized and written in a cursive-like font.