

St Paul's, Bakersfield
Priest-in-Charge Report at Annual Meeting
January 3, 2021

To say that this year has been a strange or extraordinary one would be an understatement, and as we gathered last year for our annual meeting on January 26 no one could have foretold that within two months of that date we would no longer be gathering in our buildings, neither that almost a year from that time it would be still be the case; moreover that from where we stand now this will continue to be the case into 2021. The long-hoped-for vaccine notwithstanding, cases of COVID-19 in our county and throughout the Central Valley continue to increase with the disturbing prospect of a new strain of the virus which while no more deadly is far more contagious. So, this is in part the context in which I make my third annual address as your Priest-in-Charge. However, that is not the whole story and what I am sure none of us could have completely imagined a year ago either is our resiliency as a community, the ways we have adapted and continued to be a community of faith in the last ten months. It is this I would like to focus on this morning.

Firstly, I want to say that through all this our worship has continued. On my part it has been a steep learning curve and continues in places to be bumpy as I record, gather recordings, edit and upload services. Nevertheless, worship is offered from St. Paul's every Sunday evening on both our Facebook page and YouTube channel. I am thankful for your patience, but also to all those who regularly and faithfully have agreed to continue serving as lectors, cantors, and musicians. I am particularly thankful to Miriam Vivian who regularly takes time out of her already busy schedule to point the psalms for our cantors, and also to Aaron Conner who although technically no longer of member of St. Paul's has devoted considerable time and talent to our Sunday evening worship. No, I understand that this arrangement for worship is not ideal, but I

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have made a conscious effort to keep our worship within our church and chapel with the expected seasonal changes to keep us connected to our space. I think that no matter what we may have been told in the past or tried to make ourselves believe, place matters, the building where we gather as the Church matters, and that has been made abundantly clear to us in these last ten months. Again, it's for this reason I think it crucial our building and its spaces feature in our worship. If you followed our Advent calendar on Facebook, it's in that spirit it was offered: helping us to remember and remain grounded in our sacred space.

This brings me more specifically to our campus and the all the work that has been done there. If you have been following Midweek you know that through a generous grant from The United Thank Offering and long-envisioned renovation of our kitchen has been made possible. This is underway and intended to be completed this Spring. Equally, a rather destructive leak in the large east wing meeting room allowed for a complete refurbishment of that room and its adjacent bathroom and financed almost completely by Church Insurance. Mike Dunham, our Junior Warden and to whom we all owe a great debt of gratitude, spearheaded some extensive cleaning-up projects both inside and outside our buildings removing all sorts of unneeded stuff – what else can I call it? – stuff that had accumulated over the years. The space over the Whitley Gallery which has served as a youth room has been cleared and its adjacent patio cleaned and the tile sealed to prevent leaks into our kitchen. Our alarm codes – badly out of date – have been completely revised and codes have been issued to all who need them. Our east wing is in regular use by renters. *Faith in the Valley* is currently renting four offices upstairs, and another non-profit *Vision y Compromiso* renting a fifth. Downstairs, one 12-Step program meets weekly in our newly re-furbished meeting room and *The Yellow House Music School* continues to rent its room purely for storage at a reduced rate. Finally, and perhaps most visible, is the enclosure of our central

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courtyard with an beautifully crafted wrought iron fence. This last project was made possible purely by your extra-ordinary donations. I will want to talk about this more a little further on.

Like our worship, all of our Christian Education and Formation programs have moved online – we have more or less become Zoom experts. This year have been offered three sessions of a newly created book group. We read Camus’ *The Plague* (it seemed so appropriate as we entered into the meaning of the current pandemic), but also Luis Alberto Urrea’s *Into the Beautiful North* and also Christina Baker Kline’s *Orphan Train*. More sessions are planned for this year. Two Bible studies were offered. One on the Acts of the Apostles during Eastertide and one in November on the Book of Joel. This latter was led by our new field education student, Luke Martinez. (More about Luke later). Via Zoom we hosted two of what we hope will be a series of conversations entitled *Stories in Color* and focusing on personal stories of people of color in Bakersfield specifically, and Kern county more generally. I am particularly indebted to Marilyn Droppers who was instrumental in helping put these together. We have also launched *Close-Up*, a monthly film discussion group on the representation of LGBT people in film. Lastly, this Advent was offered a “retreat” on the English 14th century classic on contemplative prayer, *The Cloud Unknowing*. It was relatively well-attended by our own members but also by members of other congregations within and without our diocese.

Our communal prayer life has continued in altered ways, and I want to point out two instances particularly. In the first instance I want to commend the work and fellowship of the *Daughters of the King*. With Kathy Harlan at the helm, they have not missed a beat in their meetings and continued prayer. I see them as a powerhouse of prayer within St. Paul’s, and am constantly grateful for their quiet work of holding up this community and its needs before God. I also want to mention St. Paul’s Marian Society which since the “lockdown” has been meeting

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via Zoom monthly to offer up the rosary for the needs of the Church and the world. Additionally, a number of novenas – nine consecutive days of prayer – for various occasions have been sponsored and each day’s prayer posted on our Facebook pages and sent out via Constant Contact. These last have been particularly well-received and will continue in the new year

Certainly what our online gatherings have afforded is the spreading wider of what we mean by community. Through these offerings some people have re-connected with St. Paul’s and others have been introduced to it. And I suppose that in this regard we are moving along counter-intuitive paths. We have actually grown as a community in the last ten months with some of our newer members having experienced St. Paul’s almost exclusively as an online community, but looking forward – as we all are – to joining our community in person. Personally, I find myself connected to our members in a sometimes deeper way as one-on-one phone conversations enable us to speak more intentionally and uninterruptedly about their lives and situations. Even text messages have become a vehicle of pastoral care, and again a way to be in touch with people’s lives on a much more regular basis. I know that Cindy Smith our treasurer will speak more directly about finances, but I would like to highlight some interesting points about this year’s Stewardship Campaign. It was conducted completely online, and yet \$15,000 more were pledged for this year than for last year. Not to mention the incredibly generous contributions to make possible the enclosure of our courtyard and to defray the small cost of the kitchen remodel not met by the UTO grant. And while we are one pledging unit below last year – 29 vs. 30 – we did have a number of our members move out of Bakersfield. Taking this into consideration, we have added new individuals and/or households to our pledging rolls. All this indicates a growth, vitality, and ongoing commitment we not have predicted during a pandemic. As I have written before, it bodes well for the future of St. Paul’s

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I would like to say a few words about our two – yes, two – field education students. Cathy Kline came to us just weeks before our in-person services ceased and offices closed. Regardless of this, she has been completely involved in the life and work of St. Paul's. I have come to regard her as a good friend and valuable colleague. I look forward to her ordination to the diaconate on the 23rd of this month, and am happy to report that she will remain with us for at least six months after her ordination. In those six months she will be looking to develop some ministries which will be uniquely her own. In early October Luke Martinez also joined us a field education student. Luke hales from Tulare and is a member of St. John's there. He is also a history teacher with a background in theology and currently working on a Master's Degree in Divinity at CDSP. Luke is currently discerning a call to the priesthood, and we are very fortunate to have him with us. I feel particularly fortunate to be working with him and value his keen insight and clear thinking. He has already done some teaching for us, and we look forward to his doing more in the coming year. He will be with us at least through the Spring. Both Cathy and Luke are serving their field education under extraordinary circumstances, and both should be commended for how engaged, involved, and focused they have been even while working at such a distance from St. Paul's and its people.

As for me, I have found myself more than busy in the past year, but always learning something new. Never in all my years did I ever think I'd be editing videos, but there one is. Ordained ministry and parish life keeps one always on one's toes. Certainly, my second year at St. Paul's has been an eventful one, and daily I am grateful for my life with you and among you. I continue serving the diocese in a number of ways, including preparing as a deputy for General Convention (which has been moved to 2022) and as a member of the Commission on Ministry. Indeed, the Bishop has asked me to serve as chair of the latter and I have taken on that

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responsibility as of January 1. While no longer a member of the diocesan immigration commission, I continue making occasional contributions to its work, and have also been working with Fr. Nelson, our Latino Missioner, on a of projects, including the Diocesan online Posada. I look forward to further collaborations with him.

None of what I do, however, would be possible without the support I receive. I am so grateful for the work of the Bishop's Committee this past year. Brian Whitfield, our Bishop's Warden, has been a great colleague and patient sounding board as I have thought, strategized, and maneuvered through this past year. I cannot begin to thank Mike Dunham who has spearheaded so much of the building work we have done during this year. He has a careful, keen eye for what needs to be done and his willingness to take on the work has made my own work so much easier. I would also like to highlight in gratitude the work of Cindy Smith as our treasurer. Not only has she done all the usual tasks the post of treasurer entails, but she has also navigated the complicated details of financial help offered by the government in terms of loans and grants. Through her efforts we were awarded a loan of \$42,000 all of which has now been forgiven, and I am sure that she will be on the forefront any new initiatives for which we might be eligible in this new year. We all owe these folks and everyone on the Bishop's Committee a debt of gratitude. I want to thank also each of you for all the quiet and not-so-quiet, the gentle and not-so-gentle support you have given me since my coming to St. Paul's. It's been and continues to be an adventure. It is in hope and joy that I look forward to coming year, and to all that God has in store for us. Thank you.