



This Old House

Jesus said, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.” Matthew 7:24-25

I have always liked old houses. Especially the quirky, idiosyncratic kind with peculiar nooks and big drafty windows. Double points for more than one staircase, finished but uninhabited attics, and pantries made for cooks and gardeners who mean business. And... I also like tankless water heaters, lots of electrical outlets, WiFi, and central air.

That is to say: I like old houses that have been carefully, thoughtfully, respectfully renovated.

Like you, I’ve been wondering what the future looks like for this house called The Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Virginia. As we move from summer into fall, the questions seem to have a bit more of an edge – how have we weathered the storms of the last year and a half?

Something about this atmosphere feels deeply familiar. I’ve lived in actual houses boarded up for hurricanes before, stocked with bottled water and propane and batteries (and TP). I have listened before while the wind howls, fades suddenly into eerie stillness, and then howls again, and this last year has felt a little like that. I have felt before this unsettling mixture of fear and novelty, of adventure and claustrophobia, of being locked inside while a storm raged. I have waited before to see what the damage actually is and what still stands. I have worried before in uncertainty about whether the creaking and swaying mean that the house survived, thanks to sound engineering and flexibility, or whether it has been pushed too far and will be condemned to demolition. It’s the uncertainty that many rectors and congregations (and bishops, truth be told) are feeling about emerging into the sunlight and taking stock of where things stand, now.

As we are all talking about what the world looks like after (please, God) the worst of Covid, the sense of radical change afoot in the world, and what seem to be seismic shifts in culture, the uncertainty polarizes many of us into several camps: “Thank God that’s over – let’s get back to familiar patterns and stability right now!” to “Might as well tear what’s left down and start from scratch,” to perhaps the largest camp: “I am (or we are) exhausted and overwhelmed and don’t even know how to think about all this.”

What will the Church look like in Virginia in 2022? 2030? Will it still be here? Will we recognize it? Will it still sustain and strengthen us to do the work of the Gospel? Will – and should – we expand or contract? Will the Good News be reaching more and younger and different people? Will the Truth of Christ, mediated in Word and Sacrament, still bring transformation and hope to our communities? Is this house sound, or is it about to topple over?

Everyone along that spectrum wants the best for the Kingdom of God and Christ’s church, including this house called Episcopal. I don’t believe there’s any possibility that the Church will be gone; it’s the embodiment of Christ on earth, in some way or another. The real question, then, is HOW to get there. Like the debates in the civil arena, some argue for locking down tradition as tightly as possible, changing nothing, maybe going a little back in time if possible. Others argue for throwing all that out and starting again from first principles, whatever they imagine those to be.

When business guru Kevin Oakes asked similar questions about managing change and culture in business organizations, he concluded organizations do not thrive when they choose either reactionary doubling-down nor sweeping, radical demolition. The metaphor that he proposes for the way healthy organizations deal with the inevitability of a changing world is renovation.

This house called The Episcopal Church is old. That in itself is a source of strength and hope. It’s a truism in hurricane country that old houses can often fare better than new, high-tech structures. Some of that may be luck and the vagaries of windstorms, but some of it is that the old houses that come through the gale were built solidly, and at the same time, because of their timber frames, they are more flexible. The big drafty windows, even boarded up, and the functionally unnecessary but comforting fireplace chimneys, can help equalize the barometric pressure and prevent blowouts. The newer places, airtight and rigid, sometimes just blow right over. (Obviously, this is a loose metaphor, but let’s play with it, shall we?)

Beyond hurricane survival, there’s great opportunity in an old house. There’s much to rediscover, to preserve, to cherish. There are things that newer generations may come to value at different times, and there are sometimes treasures to uncover in attics and even magical wardrobes. And, naturally, there’s much that may need significant updating and repair. I know very few people (though I do know a few) who’d want to live in a place with cloth-covered wiring, a privy in the garden, a wood-fired stove, and an icebox.

Where are our foundations strong and solid, and what needs repair or updating? What has collapsed in the storm and created space for something new and stronger? What did we stumble upon in the attic while we were housebound? How has the hurricane changed the neighborhood, and the city? What can we do to be better prepared to weather the next storm? While we’re patching things up, might this be a good time to go ahead and replace all those harvest-gold kitchen appliances?

How can we renovate this grand old house?

I invite you to play with this metaphor with me as we move forward. I will be meditating further about the questions and the opportunities I see along these lines, and I hope that this will be a conversation. I hope that I will hear from you. And, with that peculiar surge of energy that can come after a storm, I hope and pray and expect that good things are on the way.

And God bless us all, every one.

Blessings,

Bishop Jennifer Brooke-Davidson