A Letter to the St. Peter's at the Light Community
as we approach an important transition

March 6, 2026

To my beloved community at St. Peter's at the Light,

It has been nearly 2 decades since Joan and I first came to check out a little church community up the far end of the island. We thought we might slip in and check it out without being noticed. It had worked in many churches, but it was not possible here. In this community, people noticed and welcomed strangers from the moment they approached the door. Here, the welcome was not just with words but with open hearts that were respectful even of our desire to slip-in unnoticed. I pray that kind of welcome never changes here, for it provides clear evidence that the Spirit of the One God, the God-who-is-Love, is present in our midst!

That first day, neither Joan nor I could have imagined that I would be ordained a deacon, and then a priest about 10 years later. Neither could we have imagined that I would one day have the privilege and the duty of serving as your pastor, priest, and teacher for 5+ years. Yet all of that did happen. In hindsight, I can see that this was always the work of God's Spirit. God intended that our beloved St. Peter's community should be reborn of water and the Spirit after the covid-19 pandemic. When I look back on these things, I am reminded of Jesus' words to Nicodemus: "You will not see the Spirit directly, but you can feel and hear its effects. Pay attention! Allow that Spirit to stir you – and then you must follow its lead." These words have proven so important as I have journeyed over these decades that they now feel irreversibly etched in my soul.

In January 2021, the stirrings of the Spirit led me back to St. Peter's. I knew the call extended to me to serve as St. Peter's part-time vicar was a privilege. After all, this community already had deep roots in faithful worship, strong bonds of Christian fellowship, and true concern for God's people in need. But this call also came with specific duties from which I could not shy away. From the beginning, some of those duties (spelled out in the right of ordination in the BCP at 531)[1] felt formidable. Within you, within me, and within the world around us, the Spirit was stirring, seeking to expand the touch of this community upon the world around it. It was an awesome undertaking, one that could only be accomplished by daily attention to the signs the Spirit was indeed blowing new life into St. Peter's.

As your priest, pastor, and teacher, I had to invite you to grow in 3 areas: (1) engaging more directly in service to persons in need; (2) renewing and deepening the richness our of Episcopal worship post-covid without adding unnecessary formality; and (3) opening new opportunities for the members of the community to be transformed by their encounters with God. This work of continually extending God's invitation fell to me, not because I was exceptional in any way or was more prepared than others, but simply because the Spirit had allocated this as my work.

Within you the Spirit was stirring as well. Some of those stirrings came through the energy of newer active participants in the community; some were brought to light by events in the world around us; and some came to us in the stillness of hearts in prayer. You were open and the Spirit is now effecting important transformations in you. You are now a community that reaches out all year long to directly support and accompany God's people in need. You have built partnerships in ministry across congregational, denominational, and interfaith lines. You assist St. Mary's Episcopal community in Pleasantville with the monthly distribution of food from the food bank; some join their hands, feet, and hearts alongside other Ken's Kitchen volunteers at St. Mary's RC Church in Manahawkin, both to serve meals and to deliver food weekly up and down the island. You began the annual Burgers and Blessings event to connect with the young adults who put their lives on the line to keep residents and visitors safe. You gather new backpacks and school supplies every summer, and then you collaborate with Ocean Community Church so that these well-stocked backpacks are given to children in need. As St. Peter's Helpers and through Interfaith Health and Support Services, you drive people who need rides and you take on their handyman needs gratis. There is so much more!

Over these years a steady group gather on Friday mornings year-round to listen to the Word of God and to allow it to sink deep into their soul. We began with the gospel attributed to Luke and followed that by Acts. We made our way through some of Paul's letters before taking on Revelation and then Genesis. Faithful participation has allowed the conversation to become more honest and open. I believe our time together in the presence of God's Word has been holy.

Your understanding of prayer and readiness to pray also shows new depth and signs of new life. Every time one of our prayer warriors emails a spontaneously written prayer elevating the need of another person, I see evidence that this community is learning to see the world and all people as God sees. And, for some, contemplative prayer is becoming as essential a part of life as their share in common worship.

God also used events in the world around us (e.g., the eminent domain challenge faced by Christ Church, Toms River) to call you to stand up and announce to the diocese that St. Peter's at the Light was ready to step up as be a recognized parish, working toward a full array of ministries and with the formation needed to sustain such ministries. The diocese heard your case and agreed!

Let us be very clear: All of this was the work of the Spirit. The service ministries you have taken up, the shifts toward deeper relationship with God, the intentional embrace we have extended to all …. and even the recognition by the diocese that St. Peter's is a Parish: all God's work. <u>None of that happened because of me, nor was it ever about me</u>. <u>Neither was it because of you, nor about you</u>. Any growth we have experienced, any good we have done together… it has always been "God's doing."

Within me, the Spirit continues to stir, and the Spirit has now opened before me a new journey. Following the Spirit's lead, I have advised the Right Reverend Sally J. French (our Bishop) that I will retire from my service as St. Peter's pastor, priest, and teacher on June 14, 2026. Just as it was my privilege and responsibility to serve you, it will now be both my privilege and my responsibility to release you from my pastoral care and to entrust you fully to God's Spirit on June 14th.

I have loved this ministry and this community has been our spiritual home to both Joan and to me for nearly 2 decades. We are profoundly grateful to have been the recipients of your care and your

services. You have embraced us through many challenges of life, praying with us through the anxieties of waiting for kidney transplants for Joan's brother and son. You have been a comfort through the deaths of five of my siblings. You have journeyed with us the road of my Parkinson's diagnosis and Joan's eye surgeries. You will always have a piece of our hearts. You are family to us and we are grateful to each of you.

We have 14 weeks before my last service on June 14th. Remember that wind does not stop blowing simply because we are within sight of a new pathway. Remember Luke 9:51 and the verses that follow. Once Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, once he acknowledged to them that his days of daily teaching them were numbered, Jesus exhibited a new intensity of mission. He wanted to give them all he could so that they would be prepared to make the journey. I (and we) must do the same.

Over the next 14 weeks, I will be seeking your time and your commitment for essential work that must be done before I conclude my ministry as your pastor, priest, and teacher. Though there will be more, I want to point out today a few that require immediate attention.

1. Continue our study of John Westerhoff's book, not only because Westerhoff has much to teach us all, but also because this book is exceptional preparation for those who are ready to formalize their relationship with St. Peter's during Bishop Sally J. French's visit to our community on June 14th.
2. Formalize the structures necessary to sustain our ministries.
    a. Our present approach to the Altar Guild is not sustainable. We need to recruit either 6 or 8 individuals as Altar Guild Members, and we must make certain they are all properly trained and have a clear schedule.
    b. Similarly, our Standing Committees and ministry teams need committee members and training as well. It is more important than ever that these Committees and Ministry Teams understand the breadth and limitations of their responsibilities, and their role in relation to the Vestry, because the Vestry may be heavily engaged in transition activities.
    c. Train or re-train all Worship Assistants so that we can secure proper diocesan licensing for these ministries.
3. Establish a framework within which our amazingly Spirit-filled younger adults can build and strengthen bonds of Christian friendship as they make their way through the challenges of today's world.

There is more to be done, but this is our starting point. Let us begin this new journey toward transition with peace in our hearts and trust in God's Spirit.

With gratitude and peace,

Genevieve

Genevieve R. Bishop +

[1] As a priest, it is my task to:

- to proclaim by my word and actions the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and
- to fashion my life at every step in accord with the precepts of the Gospel;
- to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike and without distinction for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor;
- to preach;
- to declare God's forgiveness to penitent sinners, and to pronounce God's blessing;
- to share in the administration of Holy Baptism and in the celebration of the mysteries of the Eucharist,
- and to nourish God's people Christ's people from the riches of his grace, strengthening them always to glorify God in this
- life and in the life to come.