

Chapter Four

A Vision Expanded: 1990s and First Decade of a New Century

“The development of this report has been guided by a desire to help St. Mark’s chart a clearer course through the coming decade. We have acted in the belief that Christ calls all of us, both as individuals and as a parish, to be responsive at all times to the changing circumstances of our lives.”

“Planning for the 1990s: Toward a New Consensus,” The Long Range Planning Committee

During the 1990s, the mission that had initially defined St. Mark’s was enlarged and extended. At the fortieth anniversary of the congregation, a sense of new energy and a desire to renew the earlier spirit of mission was evident. In the years that followed, the congregation sought to clarify, as in times past, the direction that St. Mark’s should take in ministering within its own ranks and reaching out to those in nearby neighborhoods.

The first step in beginning this process was to find a new senior pastor. Amidst continuing physical renovation, the Church Council launched the search for someone who could oversee the final completion of construction and implement program changes. While the search was underway, Ross Trower served as interim pastor and kept the congregation focused on the goals of renovation and program development. Indeed, he played an important role in assuring that the 1990s would be a time of expanded vision for St. Mark’s, a time to honor the mission of being “God’s people in this place at this time.” Pastor Trower understood very well the need for going forth. “The people of St. Mark’s,” he wrote, “are remarkably open to new programs and forms of ministry when there is a reasonable explanation for change. . . .” The church was fortunate to have the wisdom and foresight of this particular interim pastor during the first transition in the senior pastorate.

When the search committee had completed its work, the congregation called Roger Dahlin to be St. Mark’s next senior pastor. He came to the church from important ministries in Illinois and Texas. His arrival in August 1992 coincided with the final stage of construction. Given this timing, Pastor Dahlin began his work at St. Mark’s just when pastoral leadership was most needed. He arrived, as well, just as the search for a new associate minister concluded its work, an effort that led to the appointment of Leah Schafer as the first female pastor to join the St. Mark’s ministerial team. The addition of a woman pastor addressed one of the concerns articulated in the 1989 Long Range Plan to find new ways to relate to the changing social and cultural context of the larger community. Gender issues had begun to emerge in the late 1980s and St. Mark’s, in calling Pastor Schafer, sought to address those needs.

The pastoral team, particularly the new senior pastor, oversaw completion of the renovations to the narthex and nave, as well as the installation of the new organ. In 1994, it arrived as the result of a five-year effort led by Ina Berkey. Assisted by Bill Neil, noted area musician and later St. Mark’s organist, a committee worked to advance the effort and eventually purchased a Steiner Reck pipe organ. Christened “Opus 100” by its makers, and equipped with more than 2,000 pipes, the new organ lifted music at St. Mark’s to a new level of excellence. With dedication and great zeal, Pastor Dahlin helped focus the congregation’s involvement during the last stage of construction. In particular, he made a critical contribution in working to increase the budget so that additional funding was made available to enhance the office complex and fellowship hall. Amidst much dust and chaos, he brought a special touch of creativity and excitement to the final months of work.

Meanwhile, new programs began to appear at St. Mark’s. One of the most compelling was a special mission in Croatia led by Jason Reed, who had become Director of Youth Ministry in 1990. Over the course of the decade, Jason oversaw the development of work and teaching teams at

Hope Center in Croatia and, for two years, in war-torn Bosnia. As Youth Director, Jason also shared responsibility, along with Michael and Tracey Edwards, for launching a unique parking lot ministry during the summer months. In this capacity, he worked closely with the seminary interns, or vicars, who were assigned to St. Mark's during this period. The seminarians—among them, Eric Ash, Greg Cramer, Art Cubbon, Nancy Eggert, Tom Frizzell, Jackie Heitmann, Majorie Mustafa, Ruth Smith, Gary Rhinesmith, and Erwin Roux—helped make the program a success in reaching out to area children.

Another important new effort was the tutoring program for immigrants established in the early 1990s. Under the leadership of parishioner Joan Smith, a program for English as a Second Language (ESL) was organized that reached increasing numbers of newcomers now living in the surrounding neighborhood. Still on-going today, Joan's work incorporated a dedicated cadre of volunteers who taught alongside newly arrived immigrants from throughout "the global village," as the world has come to be seen. A final new program that came about in 1996 was the St. Michael's Mission Endowment Fund. Established in memory of Michael David Mower and Michael James Ancona by their parents and others, the fund provides valuable support for a variety of scholarships and youth activities. This initiative, along with the newly created Mission Endowment, reflected the kind of giving and sharing that has long characterized the congregation.

In late 1995, Church Council reconstituted the Long Range Planning Committee to evaluate the extent to which the 1989 recommendations had been implemented. In January 1997, the results of that effort were released. Designed to look forward, *St. Mark's 2000* concluded that there had been significant and impressive gains in all areas addressed in the original plan. It was found, for example, that the participation of laity in services of worship and church governance had dramatically increased. Regarding the latter, David Nestleroth first served as the Vice Chair of Council in 1991 but then became Council Chair when Pastor Carlson retired, the first lay leader to fill that position. The following year, Peggie Morrison became the first lay person, as well as the first woman, to be elected to chair the council. In the years that followed, lay leadership increased so that when the next pastoral transition would effectively be handled by the lay leadership of Church Council and, once again, the firm hand and advice of Pastor Trower.

By the late 1990s, St. Mark's had reached a time when the major physical renovations were complete and changes in programming had successfully helped form a new bridge with the surrounding neighborhoods. It was in this context of institutional stability that Pastor Dahlin announced his decision to move on from the parish ministry into the field of interim ministries. He had provided St. Mark's with valuable leadership at a critical time in its history. His love for music, art, and spontaneity had helped the congregation address changing social and demographic conditions within the broader community.

Over the next year, while Pastor Trower again serving as interim pastor, St. Mark's underwent a search for a new senior pastor. By fall 1998, a call committee had formed and, with the help of the Metropolitan Synod's bishop and staff, began to review the files of prospective candidates for the position. In a letter sent to all interested prospects, the committee stressed that the church had grown "from a mission congregation in a rural area rapidly becoming a suburb, to a large congregation in an urban area. . . . We are both transient and rooted. . . . We worship with the sounds of organ, piano, brass, and chorus in traditional Lutheran liturgical settings blended and balanced with the touches of today's music. . . . We are warm, caring, loving and committed to our faith." These words provided an accurate and meaningful comment about the strengths and vision of St. Mark's in its forty-fifth year.

After a period of active searching, the call committee recommended in early 1999 that the Church Council call Rev. Michael H. Taylor to become St. Mark's third senior pastor. Pastor Taylor was then serving as the pastor at Abiding Presence Lutheran Church in Beltsville, Maryland, in the

metropolitan Washington area, a post he had held for nineteen years. His acceptance of the call brought St. Mark's an experienced and talented pastor who could provide the kind of nurture and focus needed as the congregation entered a new millennium. He would be coming to a church already planning for its fiftieth anniversary celebration with a newly coined motto: "Founded in Faith, Growing in Grace."

Pastor Taylor assumed his duties on September 1, 1999, and, supported by a strong pastoral staff, provided a decade of committed and innovative ministry. His years at St. Mark's were dedicated to maintaining the momentum of the period of renovation and program expansion that preceded his arrival. An especially important development was the creation of a non-profit St. Mark's Life Center and the launching of an annual Hyperthermia Week for the homeless. In addition, with his two predecessors available for consultation and his own many years of ministry in the Washington metropolitan area, Pastor Taylor was able to sustain and extend existing ministries at the church, especially the music program, which remained under the firm leadership of Bob Webb and was further enriched by the appointment of Christian Michaelsen as organist. In addition, after the departure of Pastor Leah Schafer, St. Mark's welcomed the arrival of Rev. Amsalu Geleta in 2007 as the new associate pastor. Pastor Geleta's unique background of being Ethiopian and trained both there and in Norway provided a new voice and willing hands in the effort to advance the growing cultural diversity of the Northern Virginia area.

Another vital part of that effort came when Rev. Taylor urged St. Mark's to establish a ministry to Spanish-speaking families in the neighborhoods around the church. With Church Council and congregational membership support, he invited Rev. Rafael Arteaga, a recent graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, to come and formally launch that ministry in the fall of 2001. Initially meeting in a conference room, the Hispanic Ministry—formally named the Congregacion de San Marcos—quickly outgrew that space and began holding services in the nave. That initial effort by Pastor Arteaga laid the basis for the arrival of Rev. Carmelo Santos in 2007 and the further expansion of the Spanish-speaking ministry at St. Mark's.

In the summer of 2009, Pastor Taylor announced that he would retire from the ministry in January. In December, St. Mark's honored him with a celebratory farewell evening and the membership thanked him for a decade of faithful service as senior pastor. Rev. Taylor's hope for a long retirement was not realized as he died suddenly in the spring of 2012 with the funeral held at St. Mark's. This final farewell paid tribute to Pastor Taylor's nearly forty years of ministry and the many contributions he made during that time. His death occurred during the time that St. Mark's continued the search to find a replacement for him. In July, that long effort came to a successful conclusion as Rev. Albert W. Triolo became the new senior pastor of St. Mark's. His arrival marked yet the opening of another new chapter in the history of the congregation. A story that had begun fifty-nine years earlier now continued with Pastors Triolo, Trower, Geleta, and Santos as the new ministerial team and the Church Council and other lay leaders in full support.