

Conclusion

St. Mark's 2013—Who We Are and Our Hope for the Future

“As a congregation we have had fifty years of life and witness together. A wonderful community of faith has developed and continues to develop.”

Rev. Michael Taylor, “Pastoral Staff Report: 2002”

In the introduction to the 2002 annual report, Pastor Taylor stressed the advantage of standing “on top of a hill” with the ability to see long distances. He applied this metaphor to St. Mark's as it approached the celebration of a half-century of ministry. The 2003 celebration of the founding of St. Mark's unfolded as planned over the course of the entire year. Indeed, the text for this on-line 60th Anniversary history was initially prepared then and published as a hard-copy text at that time. The Publicity Committee is grateful for all the hard work done at that time and envisions the adaptation of “Founded in Faith, Growing in Grace: A Fiftieth Anniversary History” to be an extension of that original effort.

In his comments above, Pastor Taylor implied that St. Mark's could draw strength from the historical perspective so that as “we move forward into the future,” we trust “God to guide and direct us.” He viewed the congregation at an important intersection during his years here, facing choices that must be confronted and acted upon. Since then we continue to seek to know what God has in mind for this former mission congregation now located in an increasingly urban and culturally diverse setting.

Without doubt, St. Mark's is a different congregation than it was sixty years ago. We have experienced many changes over those years. During those six decades, hundreds of families and individuals have participated in the life of the congregation. Even as many have come and gone, the church has been blessed with amazing staying power, able to retain a solid core of members that reaches across generations. Statistical information in 1997, for example, revealed that sixty-three percent of the congregation had been members of St. Mark's for at least ten years and more than eighty percent between four and ten years. For a metropolitan region where the average length of stay is about twenty-four months, these numbers reflect the unique stability that St. Mark's has demonstrated over its sixty years of existence.

Proceeding from its origins in an old farm house, with services held in the laundry room, St. Mark's now worships each Sunday in a beautifully renovated sanctuary, brightened by colored light reflected through stained-glass windows. We are no longer situated among the open fields and forests of rural Virginia but at the hub of a busy network of roads and highways. We retain a large, increasingly diverse membership, who live across the sprawl of Northern Virginia and come here to find fellowship and community.

We now combine the advantages of an older congregation with the continual influx of new families, many with children. Many of us are retired, or soon will be, but others are beginning careers and starting families. As a total grouping, we are more diverse in age, race, and ethnicity than we were at the beginning as a congregation. Our neighbors have changed, Backlick Road grows more congested each year, the Beltway—which did not even exist when the congregation was founded—comes within a block of the church, and the expansion of the Mixing Bowl looms over the Springfield area and the immediate residential blocks near the church building.

And what are we about as a congregation? Our mission remains unchanged: we seek to serve the Lord as disciples of Christ in this place at this time. We wish to do this in not one language now but at least two, to provide services and welcome to all in need, and to proclaim the gospel of Christ for all to hear. Over the past sixty years, we have labored to stay true to our founding as a

congregation and to simultaneously evolve as circumstances called us to new possibilities and challenges.

Despite the many changes that have occurred, both within and external to St. Mark's, we remain in essence very much as we were at the beginning. And the story of our founding and subsequent history, told here yet again, is only the extension of that original beginning six decades ago. This version, which the Fiftieth Anniversary Committee drafted in 2003, is rooted in that special sense of collective identity that continues to nourish all of us at St. Mark's. At the core of this attraction is the congregation's commitment to do God's will and minister to those among and around us.

If that mandate can be sustained over the coming decades, those who then look back at our efforts will read this story and be better able to understand all that happened here and the dedication that brought us to this point in time. They will understand that we were "founded in grace," hopefully always "growing in grace." For that reality we can loudly proclaim, "Thanks be to God!" and continue to sing the "joyous song" that is St. Mark's Lutheran Church again and again.