

ST. PETER'S CHURCH, CAMBRIDGE

RECTOR'S REPORT 1999

St. Peter's ministers as a public church

Dear Friends!

Speaking as a sociologist of religion, my late father once said about St. Peter's, "It seems to me that St. Peter's is a *public* church." He was never able to visit here, nor meet people from this parish. He had, however, heard Jane and me talk about St. Peter's, read parish communications over the years and seen a videotape of Easter and the Palm Sunday procession into Central Square.

"St. Peter's seems like a *public* church." The conversation must have taken some other turn, for we never discussed that observation in depth. I'm not sure what he meant by it, but I've thought about it for some time, and I can relate what it means to *me*.

St. Peter's does feel like a *public* church. Both in what it welcomes and what it reaches out to, St. Peter's has a public feel to it. Physically, the brick facade on the sidewalk looks solid and impenetrable, but, in ethos, the church is open to the public street and the public square. It is a place into which the public can and does come, and every Sunday there are a number of first-time visitors. The diversity we celebrate in the parish's membership is a fruit of that public openness.

A public space is one that members of the public can lay claim to. People who affiliate with St. Peter's quickly begin defining what the parish is, both for themselves and for others. People lay claim to time, resources and authority to make things happen. As one parishioner said, "St. Peter's is a place where you can do whatever you want!" In this sense, *public* church is different from *private* church or private club, a closed community where only a few have authority.

The parish's engagement with public life defines its outward movement as a public church. The Palm Sunday procession into the square offers a sacramental image of that engagement. Warm community is a hallmark of St. Peter's, but that mutual support is authenticated by the community's commitment to the world it is called to touch with God's grace. Wordworks and Afterworks embody that touch in Central Square's immigrant and multicultural environment. So do the Food Basket and Tania Morgan's medical work in Kenya. So do the works of Daphne Noyes at Mass. General, Sophronia Camp with Common Cathedral, and Hedy Pocius with Cambridge's housing needs. Agendas, whether parish-wide or individual, are guided by the public's needs, discerned through gospel vision.

This public character of St. Peter's echoes the public nature of God. God lays claim to the public, to the whole human family, and the story of God with humanity is a public story, full of public events. The Magi at the manger in this Epiphanytide show God meeting the global public in the Christ event. If so, the public should also be able to lay claim to God — anywhere, of course, but certainly in a community that offers itself as a house of God, as an organism inhabited by God. Personal spirituality is crucial, but that is different from *private* spirituality.

The Nicene Creed is a public faith, and we are publicly accountable for it, because God is engaged in a public quest to reconcile the human family within itself and with God.

If all this is true, it means that the Church's life and our life in the Church are very important. It means that St. Peter's is very important. It means that who we are and what we do as a parish is very, nay *infinitely*, important. This annual report testifies to the visions and work of many in the parish to receive rightly God's impulse and to offer that impulse among God's people and in God's world.

This macro-vision is realized in micro-ministry, and I now look both backward and forward in particular areas of ministry, which are organized according to the St. Peter's mission statement .

"Worship God with gratitude and joy"

Innovations — Evensong was combined with the Midweek Eucharist for some of the year to produce a sung service that I call Evensong Eucharist. Christmas Lessons & Carols, suggested by Music Minister Hazel Somerville for the First Sunday after Christmas, was so well received that we reckon it's permanent! Using inclusive liturgies at midweek, incorporating Mizeki music from Africa, and making Sunday morning more accessible to children are areas to explore in 1999.

Commissionings — St. Peter's commitment to the ministry of all the baptized calls us to renew our Sunday morning commissionings. Parish-based ministries need that affirmation, of course, but should we not also be reflecting on and lifting up the weekday ministries of the People of God? Blessings on the social workers, the medical personnel? Blessings for the homemakers, the teachers, the building custodians, the writers and editors? Blessings on the childcare workers, the information technologists, the manufacturers, the artists?

Retreats & Quiet Days — This priority from within the parish is more than matched by the world's longing for quiet and contemplation, witness Central Square's New Age bookstore and the nearby Buddhist meditation room, both opened recently. Times apart in Advent and Lent are more regular with us now, and I wonder whether it's time to open these and more to the world. We might invite people from the sidewalk sandwich board: "Be quiet with us this Saturday morning."

"Nurture Christians in discipleship"

Children — The Church's School visit to the Museum of Fine Arts signaled the children that their faith has a public record in human reflection and creativity. Likewise the eucharistic visits to the homebound offer them an opportunity to express their faith through compassionate outreach.

Youth — With Emily Swanson's leadership, the Youth Forum continues to be a flexible and creative context for reflection and struggle. The YPF needs regrouping now that Susan Fisher has needed to retire to tend her own harbingers of future youth! What about a summer youth mission, either locally or in another part of the country?

Adults — St. Peter's Forums are remarkable in their breadth and depth, yet, despite parish membership growth, education attendance is static. We welcome suggestions about times and formats that may be more accessible. We also need to take greater advantage of ministry training that is offered outside the parish by the diocese and by national organizations.

"Minister as a welcoming community"

Welcome & Growth — Quite wonderfully, St. Peter's continues to grow in attendance, membership, and diversity of age and ethnicity. The Welcome Team would welcome more folks to the delightful opportunity to welcome others!

Small Group Initiative — Community is a need that many urban dwellers come to St. Peter's seeking. Finding a toehold in the macro-parish is often helped by being a part of a micro-parish, a small group of folks with whom one can meet to share experiences and interests. Some groups already function that way, like the Choir, the Women's Prayer Breakfast, and the Common Book Club. Deacon Eleanor Panasevich is exploring the formation of additional groups that might gather around a common experience like bereavement, mothering young children, living in a particular neighborhood, or negotiating the workplace as a twentysomething.

Fun & Games — When I asked one person who left St. Peter's, because she'd moved, what observations she'd like to share, she answered, "It's a wonderful parish. I guess the only comment I'd make is to have more good times together." The Mad Hatter Fair did that, as does the Coffeehouse, but I think we'd all welcome some more fun ideas!

Publicity — While this is an oft-mentioned priority, we continue to need committed leadership to ensure that what God is up to at St. Peter's gets told as widely as possible.

"Reach out in mission to Cambridge and the wider world"

Mayor's Initiative on Race & Class — St. Peter's has much both to offer and learn in this Cambridge movement, and Seminarian Walter Stevens is coordinating our participation. The national anti-racism training that Ellie, Walter and I received will also be worked into a renewed Diversity Team's offerings at St. Peter's.

Afterworks & Wordworks — These two ministries continue to grow in vitality and institutional strength, testimony to fine leadership skills and persevering commitment. It is especially gratifying that the Afterworks pledges for 1998-99 are so generous. Their inclusion in the parish budget dramatizes the parish's integrated mission commitment.

Community Outreach — Housing continues to be a crisis in Cambridge, and many families are leaving the city as rents and sale prices boom upward. Committed action through Laity & Clergy for Affordable Housing is an important opportunity for us. Common Cathedral is an opportunity to minister with the homeless. We also need to decide where we stand on the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, a community-organizing effort supported by the diocese.

Global Mission — As Tania Morgan went to Kenya in 1998, others in the parish are considering significant global mission commitments in 1999. Surprising? — yes, until one realizes that in such a vital, fermenting community it's inevitable that there's no limit to the call that people may feel from God!

I'd like to go on into stewardship, buildings, and ordination processes, but I must hasten to a close. The St. Peter's Staff is indispensable to all that we experience and hope for here: Deacon Ellie Panasevich, Music Minister Hazel Somerville, Children's Minister Vyonna De Mel, Administrator Robert Kent, Seminarian Walter Stevens, Sexton Calvin Goffigan — you are gifts to all of us, and I am very grateful. Thank-you also to Priest Associates Lee Wiesner, Anthony Miller and Jane Butterfield, who offer much to us. Thanks also to Afterworks staffers Yolette François, Bernadette Montasse, and Lauren.

Finally, I'm deeply grateful for three great supports the parish offered me this year: the spring-summer sabbatical, which was refreshing and productive; your love at the time of my father's death; and your prayerful care during the Chicago episcopal election. You are a special public, and I am very grateful to you.

Yours in Christ,
Titus Presler