

Annual Meeting  
January 25, 2015  
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### **Making Good 50-Year Decisions**

I told a story two Sundays ago that I discovered about a creator who became frustrated when the people he created never ventured far away from where they lived. As time passed, the people did not develop. Their feet did not go beyond their village and did not climb up the mountains. Their eyes did not look at the sky. So the creator took out all the words of limitation from their language. Word like “late, not, impossible, far, high and will not understand.” And he wondered whether they would go with him to the mountains?

Someone asked me: how did the story end? What did the people eventually do? The ending of course has yet to be written to that story, or our own for that matter. We as individuals and as community as still a work in progress and “on the way.” We are pilgrims. In order to carry out the work that has been given to us, we will engage in prayer, conversation and study to ask ourselves what is possible -- how high or modestly to set our expectations.

One basic part of being a Christian is that we are expected, invited, and encouraged to grow. The Apostle Paul put in memorable terms when he said 1 Cor. 13: 11 “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” It was his way of saying that we can’t remain static, unmoved and unchanged. We change our minds over the years. Our heart warms – or hardens – about things that matter.

Pausing each year to reflect upon and attempt to measure our growth, purpose, areas of concern, and vitality, as a congregation is to me a good thing. Added in this morning is the conversation about current and future needs of our prime meeting and gathering space: Harris House. How does it impact and shape our mission and response to what God is calling us to be as a community?

The gospel story casts the first disciples as simple fisherman going about their lives when Jesus saw them. It is a classic Bible story that has given rise to many images of anchors, ships and fish as prime symbols of the Christian faith. Mark 1:17 And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

I have always been fond of this passage because it makes us a followers of the Risen Jesus Christ both the fish and the fishermen. We are the catchers and the catch. It works that way for some. We are going about living our lives, going to work or to school, when we respond to a call, a nudge, a hunch, and longing – that there is more to life than the next financial quarter, material gain, and how we are seen and

measured by others. We've achieved goals and benchmarks we set for ourselves, yet we yearn for a wholeness that comes only and most completely through faith in God that never ends.

There's a lot to like about an image of a leader saying to potential followers: follow me. For we know that leaders lead and followers, well, they follow. The work of the spirit for this community at this moment in time is to try to know where God wants us to go and desires us be. Why care? Why care about church when and if God calls us by name to follow the way of Jesus? Isn't that enough? I would contend: No.

This year is anniversary year for Christ Church. We have events planned for the fall to both celebrate our past to also to look into the future. 2015 is also the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of these buildings here on Pine Street. I often drive down Elliot Street and imagine what it would be like if our stick gothic church still sat where it did. If you were to do the same, the first thing you might notice is the lack of parking. But who thought of parking in 1860's? No one. People walked or rode a horse and buggy. I doubt we would have had sufficient space to grow as a congregation had we remained on that small section of Elliot Street.

50 years ago the people had a vision. Land was swapped. Philips Exeter Academy got precious land abutting their growing compass and Christ Church got a nice piece of property on Pine Street, a very desired residential address in Exeter. Yet being tucked in between large historic homes pulls us away from the main thoroughfares of our small town. People rarely just drive by looking for a church. In hindsight, church leaders made what I would call an excellent 50-year decision. They found land with a large parking lot and build new worship space. Room to breathe, expand and grow.

Today we are at another turn in the road in the life of this faith community. With the worship space renovated in the past ten year and the acquisition of a majestic music instrument to lead us in worship, we are saying by our actions and our financial investment: we are here to stay. Yes the exterior of our worship space is, let's be honest, quite a surprise driving down leafy Pine Street. A bold architectural statement of the 1960's, it is an "acquired taste" for some. But inside, in this space, light streams in and we have room to do all kinds of liturgies and concerts. Good work! And I'm so glad you did it before I arrived. Thank you.

The discussion at hand for our meeting presupposes an overriding question for us to pray, listen and speak through. Will we make another wise 50-year decision?

We have had a dedicated group of people work to present an overhead view of numbers and estimates about a range of choices regarding the future of our meeting and gathering space. Yet there are a number of things that report did not tackle. The report did not tackle a simple truth. To be a follower of Jesus like Andrew and John does not require buildings. Some churches in our diocese, such as up north in

Littleton, have sold their buildings. The church in Tilton has celebrated for the last time in their space. Our report lays out very good numbers and options, but it doesn't tell us what God would have us do with what was built by another generation and will have to be maintained by others in the future.

While we do not need buildings to be followers of Christ, if we chose to build and gather in the same place each week, and open our doors to the larger community, then our space does matter. Is it safe? Is it inviting and welcoming? Does it inspire the soul to pray?

We cannot be entirely certain about the ministry needs of our congregation and our wider community in the decades to come. Doing Sunday school in the 1960's in many of our churches required many classrooms for our children to learn with others their same age. We have 17 classrooms downstairs. A study of how our space is used has been provided to you.

As we gather, we would be wise to look far and wide and become aware of shifts and movements and trends that already impact the work of the church. Let me highlight a few trends identified by a pastor near Toronto, Canada, Carey Nieuwhof.

1. The online world is the new normal. Almost everyone who shows up to a church for the first time has already checked us out online.

2. Dialogue. People want to talk, not just listen. This has to do with what people do online and in person. How can our meeting space enhance and expand conversation? Is our space welcoming, wired, attractive and would lead someone to invite a friend or neighbor along with them?

3. Loyalty. I know people wince when the word Episcopal is spoken of like a brand, but for many people today do not know or care about the difference between a Presbyterian, Lutheran, Congregationalist and Episcopalian. There is little to no loyalty to any denomination. People will go where there good parking, programs meeting their needs, the sermons add something to their week, and the gathering community gives them a sense of belonging.

4. Lack of guilt. Guilt used to motivate people to change and even to come to faith. The next generation feels less guilt than almost any previous generation. People cannot and should not made to feel guilty about how often they attend, how much they decide to give financially, and whether or not to ever become a leader in the congregation and serve on any committee. Remember that in our gospel story today Jesus said to the first disciples: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." He did not say: "if you don't follow me your lives are going to be meaningless, you're going to regret it tomorrow and a whole lot of other people have already signed on so what's wrong with you..." Guilt is gone.

5. Declining trust in authority. Authority, especially when it comes to the church after the many scandals of the past decades, is earned and not given automatically.

6. Declining trust in institutions. Only 44 percent of Americans have great confidence in churches and other religious institutions, according to a recent Gallup poll. Many people do not think institutions be it the government, companies or the church will help them. The role Christ Church plays in the wider community by getting out into it and making a contribution and by opening our doors to groups will only become more and not less important in the future.

7. A desire for greater purpose. People will not care much about something if it does not have a greater purpose or meaning.

8. Personal mission. People believe they can change the world. They believe they can have a global impact. Bringing clean water to the long-isolated Episcopal Church in Cuba fits into this kind of desire.

Knowing this congregation like to do after almost two years, you will want to know about the financial cost of the choices before us with regard to what to do about next door. L. Gregory Jones and Nathan Jones add a few other trends affecting Christian institutions. They call attention to the economic stress of many churches today. It is no accident that small churches in the North Country are more stressed than here on the Seacoast, but that does not mean that we can avoid larger future trends ourselves. Being realistic about finances and capacity is to me not a sign that we don't believe that with God all things are possible. I also favor living into our abundance and not our scarcity, yet I know that God is calling us to be, and do and give to more things beyond these walls.

Today's reality is that many of us are struggling to balance the demands of work, family and church life. This is the one of the things we talk about most as staff. How do we plan events when we know that many of you do not plan your life around church? What I see many people looking for is fitting an integrated faith into their already full daily life.

People have asked me: what do I think we were should do next door. My reply is that I change my mind almost every other week as to whether God's work in our corner of Exeter New Hampshire is strengthened or weakened by a decision to renovate or rebuild the parish house.

If we were build a building today to meet our current and possible future needs, would be build another building like Harris House with its many classrooms split over two levels? If I were honest, I would have to say: no. We would probably build a smaller building, create multiple use and convertible space, use eco-friendly recycled building materials, wire it for expanding technology not yet created and probably include solar panels so that we could generate some of our own energy and even feed some back into the grid. With ample acreage, we might want to build

at ground level so there is no need for elevators and lifts for an aging population to gain access to the space.

Yet, as the numbers show, there is a gap between renovating and rebuilding. Would we care enough to give to fill that gap and fund something new? That is part of what we need to hear from you. Which makes it even more important to add your voices to the mix. We should be wise and good stewards of the past, current and future resources entrusted to us.

I would like to say that we should never use words like “late, not, impossible, far, and high” yet from my experience churches that over-extend their vision or capacity and do not have wide and committed support for big ventures, can and do stumble. God still loves them, but they come up short. And the good news is that God’s love for us, his Spirit moving in our midst, is not impacted by what we do or decide to do.

Jesus said: follow me. In all that we do and decide and dream and plan beginning with today’s conversation, I hope that we are faithful to his call.

Let me end with the closing lines of a sermon preached by Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple in 1930 when he gathered the many Anglican bishops from around the world.

“While we deliberate, God reigns;  
when we decide wisely, God reigns;  
when we decide foolishly, God reigns;  
when we serve God in humble loyalty, God reigns;  
when we serve God self-assertively, God reigns;  
when we rebel and seek to withhold our service, God reigns --  
the Alpha and the Omega, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.”

Amen.