

Our Exciting Vision for St. George's Future

(Note: this article is adapted from a sermon preached by the Rev. R. Leigh Spruill on May 20, 2007, the celebration of a new Strategic Plan for St. George's.)

Perhaps the most majestic prayer ever recorded in all of history is the final prayer of Jesus offered up on the night before he died for us. Forming the 17th chapter of the Gospel According to John, this prayer is a soaring expression of Jesus' deepest hopes for his followers and their futures. The prayer begins with Jesus' words, "**Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.**"

The word "glorify" appears several times in this prayer as well as elsewhere in John's gospel. How do we understand "glory?" What is it to "glorify" someone? "Glorify" is from our translation of the Greek word, *doxa*, from which we also get "doxology." Fundamentally, the word means praise or worship.

At a deeper level, the Greek sense of the word "glory" describes the dynamism of God. To glorify God is to give praise that God's LIFE does something, is potent and active. God's active dynamism brings power; it makes things happen, the course of events changes, people are transformed into new people, and disciples are empowered by God to do things they scarcely dreamed imaginable.

Jesus is the perfect embodiment of this glory. He is the one who glorifies God, manifesting God's dynamism visibly and powerfully in his life, death, resurrection, and importantly also in his ongoing life in the church. In fact this is the first proclamation about Jesus in the first chapter of John: "**And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.**" We all want to see this glory too.

At bottom the development of a new Strategic Plan for St. George's Church communicates our deepest yearnings to glorify God in and through our parish. The plan has been a year in the making. And behind all our focus groups and surveys, hard work and intense reflection, free-wheeling visioning, endless meetings and earnest prayers...behind it all has been our desire to see the glory of Jesus Christ ever more visibly and powerfully active in our midst here at St. George's.

I could scarcely be more excited about this new plan, and I cannot offer enough thanks to each of you who contributed to its creation including vestry leaders, our current and immediate-past Senior Wardens, Dyer Rodes and Jim Ramsey, respectively, the staff and a Strategic Planning Steering Committee chaired by Don Shriver. We have a vision for an exciting and bold future together, and I strongly encourage you to make sure you get a copy of a new brochure that outlines our hopes and dreams for the coming years.

As I have shared repeatedly since I joined you in ministry a little more than two years ago, we are so blessed with health and vitality, abundant resources, a fabulous facility, and deep respect for our rich tradition. But our most important asset is that we are a community brimming over with committed, talented, generous, and energetic people.

And yet, perhaps the highest compliment I often share with others about St. George's is that there is a general excitement to see even more powerfully the glory of Christ in our common life. Perhaps our greatest challenge is merely the risk of dreaming too small. So we all have been praying this past year that God would "disturb us if we fail to dream large enough or hold low expectations of what God might do for us and through us." I believe God is answering that prayer.

Your parish leadership has painstakingly sought input from throughout the church and worked hard to develop a new Vision Statement for St. George's that is faithful both to who we already are and consistent with our sense of what more God is calling us to be. Our new vision is:

"To be a warm church overflowing with inspired worshippers, steadfast disciples, and passionate servants for Christ in the world."

I invite you to absorb this vision statement in your hearts and minds, particularly appreciating the adjectives we use to describe our future. We will be a church that is "warm," "overflowing," "inspired," "steadfast," "passionate," and all "for Christ" and "the world."

What will all that look like in ten years? I believe our vision is faithful to Jesus' prayer for his disciples wherein he expresses his deepest longings for their ongoing life and ministry. There are three dimensions to the life of discipleship that are expressed in this beautiful prayer: our relationship to God in Christ, our relationship to one another in the church, and our relationship to the world through mission.

Jesus prays to God the Father, “as I am in you, may they be in us,” that we be united with Him as He is with God. As a congregation, the primary place of union with God and Jesus is in worship. A glimpse of our future reveals we are a thriving congregation that places high importance on worship, union with Christ in corporate praise and thanksgiving. We are a place of “inspired worshippers.”

Secondly, we will increasingly be a place of intentional community-building. Our future reveals a parish life wherein no parishioner lacks opportunities to join with others in small groups for friendship, fellowship, mutual support, learning, and prayer. With the early church, we understand and witness to the truth that the healthiest and most thriving churches are places of deep connection, care and community, places of direct and intimate personal attachments. And this is precisely what Jesus prays for his disciples as well. In addition to his prayer that we be united with him, he prays that we be united with one another: “that [we] may be completely one...” We will be there for one another as a church of “steadfast disciples.”

Finally, I believe our Strategic Plan captures a proper understanding of the word mission in its gospel context. Mission is not another word for outreach, service, charity, good deeds or volunteerism, but represents the very essence of our reason for being: to share the Good News of Christ’s cross and resurrection with those who have not received it and to help Christ re-create the world to its original designs. And here too, Jesus prays that we may be “completely one” for a reason: “so that the world may know that you have sent me....” Taking up this calling, we will be a community of “passionate servants.”

The touchstone verse for our Strategic Plan is the Great Commission: “Go forth and make disciples....” More and more into the future we will do this joyfully, instinctively, gratefully. We will be a people about the business of proclaiming the love of God visible and powerful in Jesus. Our future will not be without its challenges. But even in our challenges, as long as we are committed to remaining faithful and united to one another and our vision, I believe we can be a beacon on the hill, a very special church shining Christ’s light far and wide. But there is an old saying, “the light that shines farthest, shines brightest closest to home.”

I believe we will be that church. “Disturb us Lord, if we fail to dream large enough.” How exciting to realize that Jesus’ prayers are bolder for us than our own? Whose vision would you rather trust? For in the end, this vision, this plan, this future is the Lord’s. And Christ’s vision is never an imposition. It is an invitation to go forth into a deeper experience of being Christians and being church. And I can think of no more exciting future than to go forth into our futures with the incredible confidence that Jesus is praying for us.