
Rector's Annual Report: Epiphany Church (Cleaned-Up Transcript)

The Rev. Peter Frank

I wrote up my report as I always do, and it's basically: "we're working on this, and this has happened, and we're looking forward to this in the year ahead." But instead of starting with what I wrote, I wanted to start by just saying that I'm really proud of this church.

Beth alluded to this: this has been a difficult year. Most of the difficulties haven't been so much inside of our church, but around us. I remember when I came to this area, one thing that I was told was that, "Whatever else is happening in the world, D.C. is in its own little bubble, and its economy is always going to be great, and you can just always count on that." That's been true until this year. And that has brought a bunch of different troubles with it for many of us. I know folks have gone without incomes. I know some folks have lost their jobs in our congregation. This is a new kind of stress for us, and I just want to flag that, yes, that has been part of our life.

And what I've seen is, when there is stress on the outside, guess what? Stress comes inside, too. And this is what I'm really proud of: in the midst of all of that, I have watched this congregation continue to be true to its values—to its desire to be hospitable to its neighbors, to care for each other, to keep the main thing the main thing. And that's really big to me because there are so many people that have so many ideas about what the main thing is, right? But what I have seen at Epiphany is that we have kept the main thing: **Jesus**.

I just love—it's so hard to beat John 3:16, friends. That's the main thing: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." And I have watched this church keep that the main thing. I'm just so grateful to be part of that.

It isn't always that way. As my parents like to say, "Churches are great, except for all the people in them." I'm glad that cynical statement doesn't feel like a true statement at Epiphany. (Sorry for throwing my parents under the bus. They might be watching. Hi, Mom and Dad. Love you.) I am so grateful for this church and the way that we have kept ourselves grounded and centered there. I just want to encourage us all to keep ourselves there in the year ahead.

And I frankly also want to warn you: there will be all kinds of people, and voices, and even things in our life that will attempt to pull you away from that. But what we have here is really valuable. It is really valuable to do life with other people. It is really valuable to do Christianity with other people. Christianity is meant to be done in churches, friends. We need an individual faith in Jesus, yes, but a church is a non-negotiable part of being a Christian, and that does mean other people.

Now, you guys are here, so I'm preaching to the choir because people that come to annual meetings aren't the folks that are tempted to think differently about that, generally speaking. But it can be a tempting thought at times because it is difficult to navigate relationships with other people. It can be tempting to say, "Well, I'll just go read my Bible by myself and do Christianity that way." If that thought occurs to you, first of all, there are lots of parts of our culture that are going to try to have that thought occur to you. Secondly, just let me encourage you to resist it in the year ahead. We have a valuable thing at Epiphany, and we're doing Christianity together in a way that helps us all be better followers of Jesus.

Looking Back at Last Year's Goals

So, that's the part I just kind of made up. Now, I'll get to the part I actually wrote down.

Last year, I began my annual report by outlining some things that I hoped we would work on in 2025. I do not expect you to remember that, but I'll remind you of some of the things I mentioned:

1. I hoped that we would take a look at **Epiphany's general health** and ask how we might need to actually consider some changes for the future.
2. I asked how we might do more to encourage **evangelism and conversion** at Epiphany.
3. I asked how we might invest in the **discipleship of Epiphany's children** in a new way.

Now, you might wonder, did anything come of that? Lots of times people say stuff at meetings, and it kind of goes down the memory hole, and nothing really ever happens. But of course, because it's in my annual report, that means, yes, something did happen, so we can talk about it.

I'm actually really glad of the various things we've done this year that have moved us down the road in those areas.

The Church Health Team and Staff Changes

Starting last year, our Junior Warden, **Jeff Zimmerman**, convened and led a group we called the Church Health Team. That group was made up of Jeff, Erin Seroka, Malu Torabi, Linda Bassert, Ross Cummings, and Margo Rash. They led us as we first took a survey put out by a group called **Natural Church Development**. We took the survey and then we said, "Okay, what does it say about us, and what should we do with the results?"

First, about that survey, I just want to thank many of you who took the 15 or 20 minutes to fill it out. We needed something like 24 participants to have a statistically relevant result, and we had somewhere between 50 and 70. We had very high participation in that.

Overall, the good news is the Natural Church Development survey suggested that we're a **generally happy and healthy church**. I'm not going to go into detail on all these things, but I will point out that the average is the middle line, and we're mostly above average.

Now, that's great, and it's always nice to know you're not doing a terrible job at things. But the way this process works is they say, "It's great to do well at things, but focus on the things you're not doing so well at and look at ways to improve that."

One of the things that has been true about Epiphany for a long, long time is the thing we are least good at, at least as Natural Church Development looks at it, is **evangelism**. That's our low bar. But there is some good news: we did the same survey in 2014, and we're less low than we were in 2014. We did see some progress there.

Before I get to evangelism, I do want to spend some time focusing on some of the other recommendations that came out of that Church Health Team. They looked at the results and they said, "Yes, we know we struggle with evangelism, but let's look at the things that are next lowest. Let's look at the things that we could work on that are next in line after that."

If you look at that, one of those is **empowering leadership**, and the other is **effective structures**. We have a 54 and 55 on those. They said, "Well, let's take a look at those things." What that really meant was asking questions about how the clergy and staff do our work at Epiphany. And that begins with me.

In short, they told me that I needed to **delegate some things** so I'd have more time for sermons, for pastoral responsibilities, and for congregational leadership. Now, I admit this was hard for me to hear. I like doing the things I do. But it also fit advice I had heard from other folks.

So I've made some changes in what I do, and that's involved some letting go on my part.

- I let go of our weekly email newsletter and I also let go of our bulletin. **Patrina's** handling the email newsletter, and **Jimmy and Mother Pamela** make sure the bulletin is correct. I'm grateful to all of them. So, if you have questions about that, don't talk to me anymore.
- I have also asked **Mother Pamela** to take over this big, sprawling area of stuff that I just call **worship logistics**. That means I am no longer the guy to talk to about microphones and mission minutes and exactly who is going to do what where on Sunday morning. To be honest, I love not being that guy. I never had a lot of enthusiasm for some of these things, so I'm grateful to Mother Pamela for picking that up.
- Finally, I have given the leadership of our yearly **stewardship campaign** over to our Finance Committee. I'm grateful to **Tom and the Finance Committee** for stepping into that role.

You know how it is when you make changes—there are other changes that need to be made further down the line. The Church Health Team recommended, and the Vestry ultimately agreed:

- We ask **Patrina** to give us five more hours a week. She was about 25 hours; now she's at **30 hours a week**. That gives her enough time to handle putting together the email newsletter every week. I don't know how she gets everything she gets done in the time that we have to give her, so I'm very grateful to her.

- The other big thing came out of this, kind of killing two birds with one stone, was recognizing that if I'm going to ask Mother Pamela to do a bunch of new things, we need to help her have fewer other things to do in other areas as well. We also had a sense that we needed to step up when it came to ministry to children. On the recommendation of the Church Health Team, we were able to hire **Rebekah** to be our first **Children's Minister**, probably since—it's been a long time, probably 15 years. Rebecca's with the kids right now. I'm grateful she's at work. Mother Pamela will tell us a bit more about the things that Rebecca is doing, but it's just been really exciting to see her begin that work and to have that extra time to give towards children's ministry at Epiphany. I think we're already seeing some results from it, which is pretty amazing.

This is really important, and it does affect what happens at Epiphany in significant ways. I also want to say, so far it does seem to be working well. I'm grateful to be free of some of the things I'm free of now, and I'm grateful to different staff members who have picked those up. My hope is, and I think that this gives me time to be a better priest.

New Sunday Morning Worship Schedule (Trial Run)

That was just the first part of what the Church Health Team recommended. The next part involves all of us, not just the office staff, and it also involves changes on Sunday morning, even changes to Sunday morning worship times.

Do I have your attention?

This is what we're doing: Starting on **January 4th** and continuing through the eight weeks of Epiphany, this is going to be a **trial run**.

- We are moving the early service from 8:00 to **8:15 AM**, and we're also moving its location from the Sanctuary to the **Chapel**. That is a massive ask for people who come to the early service. We are changing when and where people worship. That's a big deal. So if you're part of that service, I just want to honor you and say, I know we're asking a lot as we try this out.
- The later service will also change its start time from 10:15 to **10:30 AM**.

You may ask, why are we bothering to make this shift? Our goal is actually to open up a time between **9:30 and 10:15 AM** every Sunday when absolutely everyone at Epiphany, including our many musicians who just have not been able to do this, can attend discipleship classes or we can have groups like this.

Imagine this: instead of asking you all to stay after church, we can have the Annual Meeting between 9:30 and 10:15 between the services. Nobody will be doing other things, and then we can go about our lives. So, it opens up time between the services for discipleship and for all-congregation events when other folks don't have things that are scheduled on top of them. It also creates a time when Epiphany kids can be gathered for special activities as well.

This will give us a way to do discipleship at Epiphany that absolutely everyone in the congregation has access to. That is something we haven't had before.

Will this work? Will it be worth shifting both of our services and all of our musicians to different schedules, and shape-shifting the 8 AM congregation to a different place? Right now I don't know, but we are going to try it. We will evaluate at the end of the season of Epiphany for the coming year how that has worked, or if it has worked, and then decide whether we'll continue with the new pattern or shift back to the pattern that we're accustomed to.

I am excited to try a change on Sunday morning at Epiphany that isn't forced on us. We have made tons of changes about Sunday morning at Epiphany, but we are actually choosing this one for specific purposes that address a longstanding challenge: the challenge of making discipleship at Epiphany available to everyone.

As they say, if you always do what you've always done, you will always get what you've always got. Let's see if there is something different for us to get out there. It's an experiment.

- This will kick off on **January 4th at 9:30 AM** by having an all-church gathering here in the Fellowship Hall where we'll hear from Mother Pamela and our pilgrims to Turkey about their trip.
- The next Sunday, **January 11th**, we'll be offering three adult education classes, a youth class, and activities for kids between 9:30 and 10:15 on Sunday morning. The adult classes will include one on the Trinity taught by Richard Rash, I'll teach a course on Christian history, and Jim Boggs will teach a course on how we can be more effective evangelists.

Focus on Evangelism

Jim Boggs's class on evangelism brings us to evangelism again. What are we doing about that?

First, yes, we continue to work on training all of us to share the good news of Jesus. That is one of our mission statements: "Equipping every member to share the good news of Jesus Christ." We went to a conference earlier this year, and we're doing things like Jim's class.

The other thing we're doing is we continue to look for ways to dip our toes in the water of our neighborhoods through events like the annual **Pet Blessing** when we actually go out into a neighborhood. I would love to identify more events like that to do in 2026—events where we go out from church and we meet people who do not go to church who might be receptive to hearing about Jesus in a setting that is comfortable to them, not just a setting that's comfortable to us. If you have ideas, let's talk about that. I am very interested. But I will say this: if you are an idea person, find the part of you that's also a doing person when you come and talk about your idea with me, because I will ask for that.

But also this year, we had the privilege as a church of helping not one, not two, not three, but **four adults come to either a new or renewed faith in Jesus Christ**. In all these cases, people came to Epiphany through their family members, and then they responded when they

heard the Gospel here. It was really neat. Those of you who were at our Easter Vigil saw that when we had two baptisms and two renewals of faith at that service.

Let me just encourage you: if you have friends or family who are hungry for meaning and purpose and God, consider bringing them here. We are getting better at communicating the Gospel as a church to those who have not heard it before. The next opportunity to do this will actually be this month. It will be on **December 28th** at our **Lessons and Carols service** at Epiphany. We make a point to present the Gospel in a simple way that we hope is accessible to people who have not heard it before as part of that service. So consider bringing someone with you on December 28th at 10:15, the last 10:15 service, who God might be preparing to hear the Gospel.

Thanks to Staff and Leaders

It has been a year of a lot at Epiphany. Before we move on, I do need to offer some thank yous.

- First, I need to thank **Mother Pamela**. Friends, you probably have no idea how much she does to make Epiphany work and to help me not go too crazy. She's my sounding board. She helps me as I help all of us. She jumps in and leads anything that needs leading without me asking. I'm so grateful to you, Pamela. Thank you. Pamela has been the Associate here for more than 10 years now, which is awesome.
- Then of course there's **Patrina**, who we've already embarrassed.
- **Jimmy**, our incredibly gifted and able Music Director.
- And also **Rebekah**, who I've talked about. This is really just a fun, creative, and effective staff team. You are very well served at this church. I just want to acknowledge that.

I'm also deeply grateful to **Beth Monroe**, who with some real arm-twisting on my part agreed to be **Senior Warden** again. Beth was the Senior Warden when we built out this facility, so she has done the things. And not only is she willing to be a Senior Warden this year for us, but I think she's willing to do it next year, too. That's really wonderful. Thank you, Beth.

This year, I'm also incredibly grateful for **Jeff Zimmerman, our Junior Warden**. He did take on the task of leading that Church Health Team, and that really did shape many of the changes that I've shared with you this morning. And he did that with great patience and focus and, if I may say so, a lot of long-suffering servitude with a difficult Rector to work with here and there.

Finally, let me briefly acknowledge again **Deacon Sally Hoover** and **Amy Boncher**. They served voluntarily for years here at Epiphany. I believe Sally served about seven and Amy served more than 10. They retired a couple of weeks ago. Thank you again for your service. We are giving a gift to both of them: Sally is getting money for books as she pursues her education, and we are helping the Boncher family go on their next Disney cruise.

Last time I checked, somewhere between 100 and 120 people at our church—more people than are in this room—have some volunteer role or another. This is a church that operates because of

folks like them, and also folks like you and what you give. We are so appreciative. That's what makes Epiphany work is the time that you give it. So, thank you.

Conclusion and 40th Anniversary

In my annual report last year, I said I hoped to see some changes at Epiphany in the year ahead. I am not sure I imagined all the changes that we committed to when I said that, but I'm grateful for them. I think we are on a good course here that is aligned with what we're trying to do and be as a church.

Also, simply this, friends: living things grow and change, right? My goal continues to be to help Epiphany be a living part of the body of Christ. And that means growth and change.

This year does mark our **40th Anniversary** as a church. I'm not sure what we'll do for that yet, but there does seem to be a repressed demand for a potluck around this place. It could happen if that's what you want, guys; we can have a potluck. But it does seem like some celebration is in order this year. We have seen God be faithful to this body of Christians through so much through these last 40 years.

I hope that you'll join me in the year ahead as we see what God brings us. As we go into the Epiphany season and try out some new things, let's just see how it works together. Keep an open mind about it if it's challenging, and also at the same time, let's see what God might do through it. Thank you.