

St. George's Church Vestry Meeting Minutes

January 21, 2021

Present: Sean Albert, Jon Ewbank, Carol Gaige, Meg Hughes, Sandee Hughes, David Kennison, Debbie Lambeth, Lynn Paska, Paul Smigelski, Fr. Matt Stromberg, Rich Unger, Jeff Wengrovius

Vestry convened via Zoom at 7:03 p.m. Father opened the meeting with a prayer. Lynn Paska moved to accept the December minutes. Debbie Lambeth seconded, and all approved.

Rector's Report

Father Matt reported on the following upcoming events:

- January 31—Annual Meeting will be held immediately following the Mass in the church and will be livestreamed on YouTube. A packet of reports will be distributed via email prior to the meeting. There will also be remote voting for Vestry candidates, prompting people to accept the slate of candidates as presented, but also allowing them the option of writing in a candidate. The members who need to be voted on are: David Kennison and Sean Albert who are provisional (having filled in for terms left uncompleted by other people); Jeff Wengrovius and Jon Ewbank, who are now completing partial first terms; and Sandee Hughes and Meg Hughes, who are completing their first terms as elected members and will stand for reelection.
- February 2—There will be a Mass celebrating the Feast of the Presentation/Candlemas at 7 p.m., in-person and remote.
- February 14—This will be our first “Little Red Wagon Sunday” (a collection of goods for the SICM food bank, to recur on the second Sunday of each month). Items can be dropped off at the back of the church or in the entryway of the Cranmer House office which will be open on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- February 17—Ash Wednesday will be observed with a Mass at 7 p.m. The service will be livestreamed and in-person with the imposition of ashes using Q-tips.
- Lenten Programing—Congregants are invited to read along in *The Way of Julian of Norwich: A Prayer Journey Through Lent* by Sheila Upjohn. There is a brief chapter for each week in Lent. Fr. Matt will lead a brief Zoom meeting each Sunday night at 7 p.m. to reflect on each chapter together.
- Father is looking into the possibility of setting up Stations of the Cross outdoors. We have a set that are paper, tacked to wood. They'd need to be laminated somehow to weatherproof them.

- Two members who have had COVID-19 (Toni Cilberti and Jim Wingate) are doing OK. A third member (Dottie Kennison) has tested positive but isn't showing symptoms.
- Nathaniel Wisenburn and Angela Marion have had a baby girl. Her name is Piper Ruth.

Senior Warden's Report

David Kennison brought Vestry up to date regarding the Great Hall boiler, which failed the day after our last Vestry meeting. Crisafulli deemed it cracked and incapable of being salvaged. Our insurance advised that no coverage is available for old boilers, unless the failure was due to external equipment. Hartford Boiler (insurance consultant) said the cause was a failed burner motor, and confirmed boiler leaks, but not cracks. Paul Smigelski's cousin, Jack Guarneri of Indoor Weather Control, agreed.

Crisafulli advised buying a high-efficiency wall unit and Vestry had approved the \$53K necessary to obtain and install it. Jack, however, quoted on a traditional cast iron unit to cost no more than \$46.5K. David's research indicates that such a unit will be 85% efficient, long-lasting, and reliable, making it the best option offered. A temporary portable heater and service calls will raise the total cost to about \$53K.

A contract was awarded to Jack. The components have been delivered to St. George's and work will commence next week. Jack has also agreed to service and maintain all of the church's boilers in the future. Based on his performance to date, we anticipate competent, fast, personal service. He has already done some problem-solving on the valves in the Great Hall that were overheating the upstairs.

David commented that Jeff Wengrovius has gone above and beyond in moving this process ahead and assuring that the Great Hall is kept at a safe temperature. Brian Taylor has also been helpful in that regard.

Security System

We continue to have no fire or security coverage in church or Great Hall but David is on the verge of resolving the issue. Bob McCloskey had submitted two proposals for a cellular dialer, one of which was for fire only, not security. Overall, the cellular approach was proving to be much more costly than our old landline system. David ran a new phone line through the steam tunnel and will assure that Verizon reconnects the landline. This will result in restoration of a reliable security link with no outlay for new equipment and a low annual cost.

Web Site

It has been a year since a contract was placed with Groupiehead and progress seems to have stalled. It's a problem now since both the old and new sites appear in a web search for "St. George's Schenectady." Since Jon Pearson will be maintaining the website, he should be involved in design. David has asked Jon to lead the effort going forward. Jon agreed to handle. As website project manager, he will gather ideas from stakeholders within the church and work with Mark Rose to get the job done. Sandee suggested that perhaps we should have a user familiar with new media approaches review the upgraded site to assure that it is user-friendly. The Internet is key in attracting new members, so we need to be open to feedback.

A/V System

Occasional video and sound distortion have continued to crop up. Sound Solutions came just before Christmas and determined that the laptop was in an area where the signal was weak. A new location and a hardwire connection for the laptop were implemented, but the video and audio problems were not fully solved. Sound Solutions will be brought back for another review.

Sextons

Sondra Kravetz recently stated that she has an apartment secured but it is being refurbished due to the last tenant leaving it in an unlivable state. The Kravetzes are already working for the landlord and hope to occupy their new residence by the end of this month. David has consulted with Sean Albert, who has a law degree, about possible alternatives should this one fall through. We don't want to put them out on the street, but perhaps we can offer them a financial incentive to move along. David also recommends getting new keys to the church, Great Hall, and Cranmer. This has not been done since Fr. McSwain's time.

Church Growth

We need new active, giving members. Perhaps a good place to look is within our own files.

- According to our records, we have 249 "Active Baptized Members" (defined as any person whose baptism is recorded in the Parish Register and contributes to or participates in the worship and communal life of the reporting congregation, regardless of how much or how little).
- We have 113 "Communicants In Good Standing" (baptized members who have received Holy Communion in the church at least three times during the preceding year, and have been faithful in corporate worship, "unless for good cause prevented.")

Still, we have only had 23 pledge cards returned for 2021. People got the card and a plea for pledges in an email, but many have overlooked it. Maybe if we sent out physical cards that would help.

In addition to pledge cards, Sean commented that it might be a nice personal touch to send a paper copy of the weekly bulletin to people who haven't turned up lately. Sandee believes that we are not reaching out adequately to folks who are not computer literate, and that even those who do receive email do not reliably read and react to it. Lynn noted that people used to receive a physical copy of *The Georgian Report* in the mail and they greatly appreciated it. We stopped doing it due to cost. Unfortunately, we don't have a paid staffer with the capacity to track and perform outreach mailings to folks who are absent.

We also need to reckon with the sad reality of the pandemic. It's too early to encourage people to return to regular worship just yet, but we should plan our approach for the day when people are ready to encounter one another in public. An in-person approach is invaluable in coaxing new or recurring members into the fold. Debbie Lambeth noted that Father has done a lot of outreach in the Stockade, and it is succeeding.

Sandee made a motion that we set a goal of focusing more concretely on growing the church, with a targeted planning session to be scheduled in the near future. Rich seconded the motion and there were no objections.

Junior Warden's Report

Jon Ewbank noted that the Great Hall boiler represented the bulk of the work for the past month. David asked Jon to work on getting new keys for all the locks across our campus (anything that the Kravetzes have a key for), sooner rather than later.

Community Liaison Report

Following an inquiry by Sean Albert about what it would take to make the Great Hall a vaccination site, Rich Unger reached out to Governor Cuomo's COVID response team to learn more. He is still waiting for an answer. Is the Vestry interested in pursuing the offer of the Great Hall as a COVID vaccine access site? We certainly should keep an open mind about serving the community in this fashion, but with scarce vaccine supplies and the complexity of delivering doses, it is unlikely that St. George's will be deputized to participate in the effort anytime soon. Meg Hughes knows a Department of Health staffer who handles provider contracts, and this individual reports that the approval process is highly demanding and has not been moving ahead quickly.

The Stockade Garden Tour will be held this year on August 7. The church gardens are usually part of the tour.

The work on the pump station is currently projected to be complete by the end of summer 2021.

The Stockade Association is working with other Schenectady neighborhoods (S. U. N.) to encourage the city to do more to protect pedestrians and bicyclists using neighborhood streets. A petition with specific recommendations has been presented to the city.

Heritage Weekend, sponsored by the First Reformed Church, will be the weekend of February 6-7. Stockade residents are encouraged to put out luminaria on February 6. First Reformed Church will be offering online programs for February 7.

Fundraising Committee

N/A

Garden Ministry and Book Club

Meg Hughes reports that Book Club is back on track, with reading scheduled into the fall. Until in-person discussions are once again possible, we will use the Sunday coffee hour Zoom connection for meetings.

- On Sunday, Feb. 21 we will discuss *Transcendent Kingdom*, by Yaa Gyasi, a novel selected by Alice Polumbo.
- On April 18 we will discuss *Island at the Center of the World*, by Russell Shorto, a nonfiction book recommended by Debbie Lambeth.
- On June 20 the club will address *The Vanishing Half*, by Brit Bennett, a best-selling novel suggested by Sandee Hughes.
- On August 15 the club will address the biography *The Invention of Nature*, by Andrea Wulf, selected by Jeff Wengrovius.
- On October 17 the book to be addressed is *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, by Reza Aslan, recommended by Rich Unger.

Garden Ministry members look forward to warmer weather and welcome participation in the Stockade Association Garden Tour on August 7, whether as a formal part of the event or simply as a welcoming neighborhood green space.

Hospitality Committee

Sandee Hughes notes that the hospitality committee continues to be sidelined by the pandemic, but reports a successful “Zoom coffee hour” on Sundays at noon. She appreciates Chris Henry for getting it started and Meredith Ewbank and Father Matt for keeping it going.

Communications

Lynn Paska reported that pictures are up on the website for St. Lucia’s Day, St. Nicholas’ Day, and the Greening of the Church.

The next deadline for *The Georgian Report* is Friday, March 5.

Lynn issued a plea for *The Georgian Report* archival files to be transferred whole to the new website. These back issues are a valued part of the church’s history and help enable research by many looking into practices of years past.

Treasurer’s Report

We have cash surpluses in both our TrustCo bank account and at RBC, and made no withdrawals from endowment principal in 2020 for the third year in a row. Giving remained strong in 2020, and expenses are generally down due to COVID-19. Our “safety cushion” for 2021, however, has been reduced significantly due to spending on 12 building maintenance projects undertaken during the last half of 2020. We will need a cash withdrawal from our endowment principal to pay for the new boiler for the Great Hall.

Contribution statements for 2020 have been mailed to all pledging church members, and an audit of PayPal contributions in 2020 was completed. Giving via PayPal increased greatly over the past year, but we didn’t have a clear way of funneling these monies through a system of checks and balances. (This form of giving has generally been classified as “loose plate” contributions.) Following his scrutiny of the income generously provided to St. George’s via PayPal during the pandemic, Jeff is assuring that letters of thanks will be issued to non-pledging church members who gave significant amounts. Note: Jeff would like to switch from PayPal to Venmo because there are no fees taken out of Venmo contributions. PayPal takes 2.5%.

The church raised \$270 in donations made by members in lieu of spending time ringing the Salvation Army bell at Christmastime. A check and cover letter were sent to The Salvation Army.

Meeting adjournment

There being no objections, the meeting was adjourned at 8:40 p.m. The next regular Vestry meeting will be at 7 p.m. February 18.

Respectfully submitted,
Meg Hughes, Vestry Clerk