

The Rt. Rev. Klrk Stephen Smith
Pentecost Sunday, May 20, 2018
Old Lyme Country Club
Capital Campaign Kick-Off Event
Keynote Speaker

It is indeed an honor and a pleasure for me to be with you on this Pentecost Sunday when you kick off your capital campaign. It's also great to reconnect with so many old friends, although many of those who were here when I was rector thirty years ago have gone to their great reward.

I myself confess to feeling a bit wary when Mark Robinson asked me to be with you today, I can remember quite well when I asked former rector Nigel Andrews to come and preach on the 100th Anniversary of the parish. Someone thought it would be great to have a former rector present on that occasion. He did come and he preached a fine sermon, but he died shortly afterwards. I hope this is not the start of a precedent.

Thinking about today of course brought back many great memories that perhaps a few of you will share.

For instance I remember being interviewed back in 1984. Bishop Walmsley forced me to come for the interview but I really didn't want to go. Old Lyme, I thought to myself, there will just be lot of old retired navy captains down there. I was only 32 years old and pretty full of myself. But when I was sitting in the Grisold Room being interviewed, I changed my mind. The committee was lively, visionary, and they wanted to grow the church. Talking with people like Pat Rogerson, Howard Patch, Millie Wrege, Lytt Gould and others convinced me. These people were pretty cool and this is where I would like to be.

I am not sure I got off to the best start. After the vestry called me and I accepted, the Sr Warden asked if could come for a vestry meeting, even though I wasn't officially the rector yet. The problem was that we had a brand new baby at home, and I was seriously sleep deprived. I drove down from West Hartford where I was the assistant at St John's Church, and took my place at the vestry table, which for some reason was down in the basement at the time. It wasn't long into the meeting that I realized that I was in serious trouble. I could barely keep my eyes open. But I knew I had to make a good impression! It was then I remembered the advice a friend once gave me that if you get sleepy while driving, pinch yourself, so I proceeded to do so clandestinely under the table. The trick worked, but I apparently pinched myself harder than I thought. When we got up for a break my forearms were bleeding. I am not sure what the vestry members thought - either the new rector was a weirdo, or he had the gift of the stigmata.

But I soon got settled in. My family and I moved into the rectory and it wasn't long until we had experienced the famous rectory ghosts. My daughter Jordan as she grew up would report being visited in the night by a young woman wearing a white dress, and I was occasionally awakened at 3 AM by what sounded like a family reunion going on downstairs in my living room.

The former rector, Charles Griswold, did his best to make the transition go smoothly. I remember just before I took over, he invited me to lunch and gave an annotated parish directory "I have made notes on this for you about which parishioners you can count on, and which ones you will want to avoid. And if you ever breathe a word of this to anyone, I will deny it," But the helpful members outweighed the bad. We hadn't even unpacked the boxes when several of the old timers arrived to welcome us with dishes of hot food.

There are so many other happy memories-- The new children arriving each fall at Lad and Lassie Nursery School. Going to the Beach club after church on Summer Sundays. Bishop Rowthorn joining us for Christmas Eve services. What a great place it was for a young clergyman. I used to tell my friends, "Its like a Currier and Ives postcard," we don't even lock our doors at night!

There were dark times as well, like the time Hurricane Gloria struck, or when I got that phone call saying a young man of the parish had been killed in the Pam Am Flight 103 explosion over Lockerbie Scotland or when a conflict at the Nearly New Shop nearly derailed the congregation.

All of this was a part of the history of Saint Ann's, a past that I was a part of and which I remember with fondness. You of course have been very busy in the 38 years since I left here. Old Lyme, Connecticut, and the World and the Episcopal Church have changed a lot since then and this parish has responded to those changes by moving into new areas of ministry that I could not have even imagined back then.

And now it is time for you to rise to the occasion once again as you make your building more functional and more accessible for your present and future needs. Your rector and planning committee tell me that your main goal in this building project to open up your physical space especially to children and to people with disabilities. Your timing is perfect.

But before I tell you why, let me say just a few words about the importance of church buildings. We all know that a church is more than its building. A church is the family of God. Such a family however needs a home, a building that it can use for the purpose of living out its mission. When all is going well the church plant is a means to an end, a physical embodiment of a spiritual ideal.

During the middle ages it was said that gothic cathedrals were "sermons in stone", in other words, the very way they were built and furnished proclaimed the Gospel message, often to people who couldn't read or write. That is why things like stained glass and and saints statutes were so important. Modern churches may not be so full of the symbols of our faith, but their very design says something to the world about the hope and dreams of the people who gather inside. It's not that hard to "read" Saint Ann's as a building. When it was built, its architects made a statement by building it in a classic New England design. The first members were saying-- We Episcopalians are not that

much different from New England Congregationalists, the building says, except when you come inside, you will notice that the altar is the center of our worship life and not the pulpit. That's a good thing. But the church was also small (I used to hear it jokingly referred to as the doll church) which meant that it was not intended to grow very much, nor did it have much space to reach beyond the needs of its founders. There was very little space for kids, and what there was was in the basement, the kitchen couldn't really handle feeding very many people, and the church office was the size of a closet. There was no room to expand. The image of the church this projected to those driving by on Shore Road was of a small group of respectable people who got together only on Sunday morning, but didn't stay very long and were not particularly concerned about either kids or the wider community.

But it wasn't long before the church experienced growing pains and expanded on many levels to better reach its neighbors. Some of this building happened in my time. The organ was enlarged and became the focus of community musical events, the downstairs was reconfigured to host a nursery school, the office was moved to a better place to manage a full weekday schedule of programs and activities, the parish hall started to host AA, scouts, and study groups. The image of the church changed from a small group of self centered folks to a group that was increasingly concerned with being involved with those beyond its walls.

Now you are ready to take an another quantum leap forward as you reconfigure the building to reach more and different people. You are doing this, not just to grow your membership, or attract more pledging units. You are building because Jesus calls us to welcome and serve all people, especially those who are neglected or forgotten. A building campaign is not a gesture of expediency, it is an act of Christian compassion.

The more the church lifts its gaze beyond its needs and outwards to the larger world, the more we will fulfill the purpose Jesus intended for us. The Good News is that when we do, we will in fact also attract new members . A former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple summed this up in one of my favorite quotes: The church that lives for itself, he said, dies by itself. As a bishop, I have seen the truth of that statement demonstrated again and again. I have seen congregations both large and small stick their heads in the sand and refuse to engage with a changing community, and I have seen congregations come back from the brink of extinction by being willing to strategically reach out to people in their neighborhoods. Let me give you just two examples from my own diocese.

The Church of the Holy Spirit in North Phoenix had to close a few years ago. It had a great location and a fine building, but it wasn't interested in doing anything except catering to the preferences of its dwindling and aging congregation. In spite of a lot of encouragement from the diocese along with financial aid, they made it clear they did not want to have any bible study, classes, church school or youth program. "We just want to come to church, say our prayers, see our friends and go home, one parishioner told me, What's wrong with that?" What's wrong of course is that that church is no longer there.

St. Peter's, Casa Grande is a different story. A few years ago it was a tiny rural congregation of about 30 people. This year they have had to expand to three services so all of its 200 new members can fit in its little sanctuary. What changed them was the vision of its Sr and Jr Warden, who told me that they had a dream, that if they wanted to grow the church, they would have to do it! So they started a Sunday school, even though there were no children, they raised enough money to hire a dynamic young priest. His first visit when he arrived was to the principle of the elementary school across the street, he asked the fire department if he could bless their fire engines, which he did wearing cassock and birretta and swinging incense, and who signed his rock band up to open the country fair. He engaged with the community and they engaged with him.

It seems obvious doesn't it, but engagement with the community is something we American Churches largely forgot about during the past century. This trend has been well documented by the theologian James Davidson Hunter in a fascinating book called, *To Change the World, The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Later Modern World*.

He points out how during the 19th century, most hospitals, social service agencies, and even schools were founded by churches. But this changed around 1950. Churches began to sell such buildings off and to close them down. They were too much work, and they didn't serve the needs of their own members. In Arizona the Episcopal Church used to own St Luke's Hospital, the largest charitable hospital for the poor in Phoenix, but my predecessor didn't like going to the board meetings, and so sold it to a for profit company for one dollar. His excuse was that it took too much energy away from congregational concerns. What a mistake!

As bishop, I have tried to change that attitude by requiring all the clergy to set aside one day a month of their time to serve as chaplains to some community organization of their choice other than the local hospital, where they already spent enough time. Some were very creative. One spent his time at the humane society, another in a large semiconductor factory. I needed to practice what I preached, so one day a month I go to the Phoenix Airport where I am part of their chaplaincy program, talking to and praying with the travelers and workers there. I call it coffee hour with 10,000 people. Not only does it get me out of the office but the thousands of harried travelers get to see our collars and badges and in some way know that the church is there and that God cares about them.

Now you are preparing to create a larger engagement with your community by making your building more accessible. From what I understand, two of the groups you are targeting are children and people with disabilities which makes it physically hard, if not impossible to come to church. I have got to tell you that almost every church I visit as a bishop says to me, we wish we had more young families and children. So I ask, what are you doing to attract them?

Well, nothing is the answer, we thought they could just come and be like us, worship when we do, like we do, and of course, let us make all the decisions. But if you offered something that attracted them, they would be here. I respond. And then they change the subject. If we don't make our churches kid friendly, we won't have any kids, and that includes welcoming them at worship, having space dedicated to their needs, and making access to the church inviting and friendly.

The same words apply to people with physical disabilities. A clergy friend of mine who has an adult son with Down syndrome and who studies these things tells me that 75 % of people who have physical disabilities don't come to church--the reason is simple, they can't get in, or they can't see the bulletin or they can't hear the speaker, or they have an autistic child who makes noise and they are not welcome. When Jesus said to them come unto me, I think he was referring to more than children. He meant all of those people who we say we welcome, but who by our structures we say, go away.

We are so often guilty of just that, turning away the children of God from our fellowship even when it comes to the structure and shape of our buildings.

As I said before, the most important reason for involving your church in needs of the community is to fulfill Jesus's desire to make his house a house of prayer for all people. But doing that has an important fringe benefit as well; it will also make you attractive to potential new members even people who previously had no real connection to the church.

Your own history is proof. Saint Ann's is blessed by having a nice little endowment fund (which they didn't have when I was rector), but because of a parishioner going out into the community and offering communion, a neighbor had questions and ended up leaving an endowment to the church.

In short, Your budget is now hugely underwritten by a gift that came from outside. And it came your way because that person was impressed with how you cared for the community.

Now it would be wonderful if all your funds could come from such special gifts, but the reality is that if your vision is going to become a reality, it will involve all of you, neither large advanced gifts or a big number of smaller gifts alone will get you to your goal.

So this brings us to fund-raising, which is after all why you are all here today. It's something that no one really likes to do, including myself. I remember for example in your last building campaign, I was pretty reluctant to make those important asks. Finally one day, then Sr. Warden Jean King, took me to lunch and asked me flat out--do you want this project to succeed or not--Of course I do, I replied. Well, then, you had better start acting like it!

Its much easier to act like it when you believe in what you are doing and you share that enthusiasm. Not long ago I was listening to an interview on NPR of the man who is in

charge of raising funds for the rebuilding project at Lincoln Center. It was his job to raise almost two million dollars! The interviewer was dumbfounded. How can you even begin to ask people for that kind of money, he asked, you must not sleep at night. Just the opposite, said the fundraiser, I have the privilege of asking people to support that which they are most passionate about. Our givers are generous because they love music and they want to share that pleasure with everyone. It's my job to connect our needs with their passions. And when that happens, money is not a problem!

You are doing the same thing, but of course on a much smaller scale. You have the chance now to connect people's money with their passion. You are here because you love your church, and have benefited from its programs, its preaching, and its fellowship. Your history over the last several generations has demonstrated the ways in which you have worked to share the blessings of Saint Ann's with an ever widening circle of people. This building campaign is just the next step in that process as you open wider the doors of your church to all people, not just today but for many years to come.

This morning at church we celebrated the feast of Pentecost. What I like to call the birthday of the church. We heard about the coming of the Holy Spirit and about how it energized a group of disciples who were frightened and confused about what they should do next. It is interesting that the Holy Spirit comes upon the church in Jerusalem, where the object of people's worship was the temple, a building. Faithful Jews believe that it was in the temple that God's Holy Spirit dwelt. They believed that God's spirit actually lived in the stones of that building. But then on Pentecost something strange happened. They did not find the spirit in the temple anymore, instead God's spirit came to dwell with God's people. The followers of Christ became living stones. God was not in church, God was in us. That was a turning point for the early Christians. Church buildings would never more be just a sanctuary, they would become a launching pad for our ministry in to the world. God dwelt not in bricks and mortar but in us.

Many of us learned a little poem in Sunday School. This is the church. This is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people.

You are the church, and you have a steeple, as you open it up, you will see all the people,

Let us pray:

Oh God, you have called us to be your people in this place. Help us to build on the foundations that were laid for us by our forebears that we might become an even more effect witness to your Gospel. Grant us, and the people of St Ann's a spirit of generosity that we might have the means to meet the challenges before us. Grant us the guidance of your Pentecost spirit that we might approach the work before us with energy and enthusiasm. Hear our prayer which we offer in the name of your Son Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. AMEN