

Moving Spiritual Accountability to the Next Level
The Rector's Annual Address
St. David's Episcopal Church, Topeka, Kansas
The Reverend Donald F. Davidson
January 20, 2008

Starting in 1933 and ending one year to the day before his death, President Franklin Roosevelt presented a series of fireside chats. Some folks in this room may remember hearing them; others may remember their parents talking about them. They were not speeches but rather thematic presentations in the most wholesome and personal manner.

Because they were on radio and not television, as television was still a number of years off for most of the public, the listeners imagined their president speaking personally to them, talking about his hopes and his faith for the nation especially during a time of war.

I wish that today you could imagine me sitting in a rocking chair and wearing a nice red cardigan sweater, by a beautiful fire and chatting with you about our church, our home and about my hope and my faith for the days ahead. That is what this address is all about; it is a personal talk with each of you and an opportunity to chart the course for tomorrow.

I begin this year with a quick review of the year now past. Like anything else there were moments of great joy, and great sorrow and everything in between. The wonderful cycle of life continued and like every year of its history, St. David's was there for its people and its people were there for St. David's.

I am pleased to report for the fourth year in a row that we end the year in the black financially. For the third year in a row we grew in membership. Our attendance stayed very close, albeit slightly down, and I think with all the moving around that is very good. We increased the amount of dollars pledged this year and the number of families that filled-out a pledge card. This is good news and I am very proud of St. David's.

I am deeply thankful for the tremendous sacrifices and work of the Architectural and Construction Committees and the sub-committee on music. The work that has been done is simply amazing. I hope every member of this parish will attend Ministry Nights and participate in the building process. We are well on our way to building a new building. It may not surprise you that St. David's is a parish of people that have firmly held positions, indeed on almost every issue we have people on every side and that tells me that people really love this church and want this parish to move forward and be successful. There finally comes a time when decisions have to be made, and I am thankful for those that understand this and are willing to move on.

Often times we talk about what it means to be accountable to ourselves, to our families, to our nation, to our clubs and organizations, to our favorite sports teams and somewhere in that long list is our accountability to the God who created, redeems and sustains us every minute of our lives. I am going to speak of a number of ways that we need to step-up in our personal and corporate spiritual accountability. These things are not in any particular order of precedence.

Prayer! What does it mean to be accountable to God in prayer? Prayer does not cost us anything in terms of earthly money or possessions. Prayer is a conversation with God; more listening I hope than speaking. Prayer helps us to manage ourselves, our emotions, our fears and our decisions. If we really want God to be a part of our lives in a personal way, it sure helps if we send a knee-mail on a regular basis. Moving to the next level of spiritual accountability means making prayer a priority in our lives.

Pledging! This word follows the last one only because they both start with the same letter of the alphabet. Bishop Fred Borsch, Retired Bishop of LA, remarked a number of years ago that when a person arrives at the pearly gates the first thing that St. Peter is going to ask is to see your check book. Truth is, where your treasure is, so is your heart. I think this parish may have a quaint but out-of-date understanding about pledging. Pledging is about commitment. All of us can say the words "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America" and those words have nothing to do with our personal opinion of the leadership at any level of our government. They have everything to do with our personal, emotional, and sometimes physical commitment to our nation.

I do not understand why 47% of the families of this parish cannot or simply will not fill out a pledge card. The money part is significant; of course it is, as we rely on you. Moving toward the Biblical tithe is a giant step toward moving to the next level of spiritual accountability. Yet, the commitment is not predicated on the amount. A pledge can be a penny or a dollar. Is there really anyone who could not write down 1 cent and send in their pledge? In so doing, they express that they are partners with their fellow St. Davidians in growing their church, they continue their commitment made in baptism and they acknowledge their accountability.

Our Treasurer Jim Edwards will explain later that the Vestry and Leadership made tactical decisions with prayer that we must ensure that our programming and youth had the resources to move forward. Those decisions were the right ones to make, but they have consequences.

Along this road toward spiritual accountability, it is my plan to join hundreds of other parishes in publically thanking every family who makes a pledge for 2009. No amounts will be published, just a thank you for those who have pledged their commitment. I also plan to bring to the next annual or congregational meeting by-law amendments that will make pledging part of the qualifications for service on the Vestry and Endowment Board of this parish. I believe that if a person is are not willing to pledge a penny, I question if that person should be making decisions about how the gifts of others are used.

If you have a reason for not pledging please let us know. We need to know how the Rector and leadership can be more accountable to you. I would ask, however, that you not blame us for decisions made beyond us.

Growth! Spiritual Accountability means that we recognize that growth is part of being a Christian. A church is not an invitation only club, quite the contrary. Once a member of a church, every person should do everything possible to find other new members, the church is the sales force, the center of marketing of the Christian mission... to bring Christ to the world and the world to Christ. Christ is not something that once received by the power of the Holy Spirit in baptism that we should keep to ourselves, but we are called...mandated to do as our Lord has done.

With that thought in mind, we are changing the Sunday morning service schedule as of two-weeks from this morning. A new service will be added at 9:00 and the 10:30 service will move to 10:45. The 8:00 Sunday morning and 5:00 Saturday afternoon services will stay just as they are.

The new 9:00 service I am calling a "family" service, not that families are not welcome at any of our services. The rationale for this service is as follows:

First and foremost we need to grow. We need to attract new members. In this election year we need to tell people that we are a church where they will not be hit over the head or pushed by politics. Our parish is a political free zone. That the Episcopal Church is a place where people are not told who God is, rather they are asked to get to know God in Christ Jesus personally and where the Bible is not the end but the beginning of a spiritual relationship. We have much to celebrate in our church despite loud voices to the contrary.

The new family service will not be to everyone's liking. That is why restaurants have menus and we now have a 14 screen theatre. People want options. The liturgy, the theology, the tradition of the church will not change... the method of how those things are expressed within worship will change.

At 9:00 you can expect to see primary use of LCD projection, praise music and new liturgies as approved by the National Church and our Bishop. The Children's sermon and adult sermon will be presented one after the other, and will follow the same lectionary theme of the day. The service will be slightly shorter than the typical principal Sunday service and will be followed directly by Christian Education for children and adults.

The 10:45 service will also change as we return to the exclusive use of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer and the 1982 Hymnal, and an intentional return to prayerful silence and a more formal and ritualistic atmosphere.

I am extremely pleased that among the many gifts of our Director of Music is a willingness to span the chasm between classical hymnody and praise music. Believe me, this is a rare gift.

So..what can you all do? First pick a service that touches you and that you find inspiring. Then... invite others. I believe we can and will build both principal services to the capacity of this room prior to the time we move into our new building. Moving to the next level of spiritual accountability means growth.

This year we welcomed Fr. Matthew to our staff and to our lives. I am very pleased to have this highly capable young man with us and his presence has borne fruit. For the first time in many years I can proudly boast that we have an active and enthusiastic youth program at St. David's Church, and it is growing.

We have made a very clear decision that our new youth center or Internet café and coffee bar in the basement is youth territory and youth territory only. I believe it is about time that St. David's makes a very serious commitment... a pledge... to our youth in saying that they are no longer tag-alongs with their parents; they are no longer to be seen but not heard; that they are not second class citizens but partners in ministry to all people. Moving to the next level of spiritual accountability is talking about youth as the church of today!

2007 has been the year of partnerships for St. David's and every one of them has helped us along our journey. I have no doubt that our relationship with Temple Beth Sholom will continue...actually, I am pleased to announce that St. David's Day will take place at the Temple on March 2 complete with a catered dinner from Boss Hawg's. I hope everyone takes a minute to read the remarks from Rabbi Steil that are printed in the pass out material for the annual meeting.

We continue in a blessed relationship with our sister parish, Grace Cathedral. Three events during the year will be passed back and forth between our two parishes: Shrove Tuesday, The Great Vigil of Easter and Vacation Bible School during the summer.

We also had great partnerships with the Topeka Masonic Center and our neighbors at Faith Lutheran Church.

We could not be positioned to move to that next level, to build a new building, or to grow in so many ways without an outstanding vestry. It has been my honor to serve with the 2007 Vestry and especially with an exceptional Senior Warden. In a little while we honor Margaret for her two years as Senior Warden... basically one before and one following our fire. I find descriptive words difficult, but there is none stronger or more deserved than the word authentic. Margaret has given her all to our parish, working in the office 20+ hours every week; the point person for our work with the insurance company; keeping the vestry and committees informed and helping us to understand a most complicated process. She's the best and I hope every member of this parish will take a moment and thank this incredible lady. My thanks as well to Deb McGlohon who will continue to chair the Youth Advisory Group a.k.a. YAG, and Chris Holman who will continue as a Sunday School teacher.

My brothers and sisters, the time has come to take our personal spiritual accountability to the next level. To participate fully, to pray daily, to pledge annually (and if you have not you still can), to give freely, to invite without hesitation and grow in faith. The road before us is filled with awesome sights and adventure. Let's go with Christ and let's go now!

Amen