

Vision Qualities of Church 2017 with Commentary #1

January 10, 2017 in [Church](#) | Tags: [Church](#), [Image of God](#), [Vision](#)

As I have been preparing to write my 23rd Annual Report as Rector of St. Philip Church, it has occurred to me that there are number of qualities, I hope might guide us as a community of faith.

We certainly do not live these values perfectly. Rather they are a light that might guide us to more fully embody the nature of Christ's love that is at work in our midst.

I have been posting these values on Facebook. Here are the first five with a brief comment at the end –

I hope that in our community:

**we find that we are challenged to perceive
the presence and action of God
at work in every aspect of life**

**our hearts break open
to the beauty and love embodied in Jesus
and accessible to us in all of life**

**we are touched by the softening presence of God's Spirit
enabling us to more fully embody that quality of love
that is our true nature**

**we accept the flawed reality of our lives
and allow space for the brokenness of all people
with whom we share the gift of life**

**we acknowledge that, as people who imperfectly manifest
the image of God in which we were created,
we will cause hurt along the way**

As I think all discussions of anything to do with Christian faith should, my values for church start with a firm conviction of the beauty and goodness that are our true nature as human beings created in the image and likeness of that God who is love and who manifests with the world in compassion.

Where we start affects where we end up. If we start with the goodness and love which are our fundamental nature, we will be much less likely to wander off down those dark and twisted paths that tragically characterize so much of Christian history. We are radiant sparks of light sprung from that source of all goodness and beauty we call God our Creator.

But, we do not stop where we start. Christian faith is nothing if not brutally honest about the reality of how we human beings manifest in this life. We understand that we live only imperfectly those qualities that are characteristic of our true nature.

The prophet was not engaging in idle polemic, or unnecessary negativity when he said,

**All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way (Isaiah 53:6).**

Talk of “sin” is not dark, shaming, rejection of the beauty of our true nature. It is simply an acknowledgement of the painful reality that we all at times live below the exalted vision of what it means to be truly human.

It is not damning nor judgemental to acknowledge with Paul that,

all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

It is simply an acknowledgement of how we behave in this time-bound material realm.

We have all left home. We have all turned from that radiant wholeness in which we were created. It is impossible to give a satisfactory answer to why we go astray; but we place ourselves in grave danger if we fail to acknowledge the realities of our often dark human behaviour.

We must never assume that any human relationship will ever work perfectly. In church as much as in any other human community, my rough edges are going to rub up against your rough edges. There will be pain.

The hope is that, in the church, we find ways to navigate this pain that do not involve judgement, rejection, shame, and escalating violence. We hope to respond to the hurt in which we share, as a call to return to our true nature and affirm the beauty and gentleness that reside at the core of our being.

Vision Qualities of Church #2

January 17, 2017 in [Church](#) | Tags: [Abundance](#), [Church](#), [Vision](#)

In preparation for writing my 23rd Annual Report as Rector of St. Philip Church, I have been reflecting on the values to which I aspire for us as a church. Here, with a few additional reflections, is the second group of five values:

**despite the hurt we cause, we aim to approach one another
with the openness and acceptance of “forgiveness”
which is the true sign of freedom**

**we celebrate the uniqueness of every human being
and honour and respect the particular ways
God is at work in all manifestations of the Spirit**

**we are less trapped in the dramas that often afflict communities
and live with growing steadiness,
openness, flexibility, and freedom**

**we are less controlled by external forces ,
and more independent of opinions, social norms,
expectations, and demands imposed by others**

**we experience a consistent call to surrender more deeply
to the power of love
and to live in the abundance of God**

My fifth value in the first group of values I posted was intentionally provocative and did puzzle some people upon first reading. I wrote,

**we acknowledge that, as people who imperfectly manifest
the image of God in which we were created,
we will cause hurt along the way**

This is simply honest and realistic. There are no perfect communities. In every community that includes people, hurt will happen. We never fully live up to the luminous beauty of that image of God in which we were created and so we fail to communicate effectively. We occasionally respond from our own wounded small self. We put ourselves and our needs at the centre of life and so we do “cause hurt along the way.”

Churches are no different. People get hurt in church communities. But, in Christian community we **“aim to approach one another with the openness and acceptance of ‘forgiveness’.”**

To start with forgiveness means we begin each day without carrying along a huge ledger of past wrongs, grievances, and scores to settle. We enter into each encounter with the openness that is only possible because we know that there is in us a strength and power of love that is greater than any harm we may ever suffer.

We trust that, no matter how difficult, awkward, or painful any relationship may be, God is at work in every human being on earth. We seek to discern that work of God even in the person by whom we feel we have been hurt. Of course we are sensible and do not put ourselves unnecessarily in harm's way. But we experience a **"growing steadiness, openness, flexibility, and freedom"** that are signs of the depth and strength of God's work in our own lives.

From this position of deep inner security, we are able to live in relationship to all people with true freedom. We are no longer controlled by the reactions or responses of other people. We experience the **"the abundance of God"** which set us free to live in obedience to the Spirit of Love we see revealed fully in the person of Jesus.

Church is the place where we get to practice living from abundance. Apart from our basic safety, there is nothing much we need to protect. Our lives flow from the endless resource of a love that is stronger than death and a goodness that is greater than all harm.

Vision Qualities of Church 2017 with Commentary #3

**11. we are challenged to trust the deep wisdom of God's Spirit
inherent in every human being
and to honour God's work in all people**

**12. we support one another in trusting the deep reality
that makes it possible for us to
meet one another beginning with "yes"**

**13. We seek to avoid being controlled
by the fear and sense of scarcity
that indicate a faltering trust in love**

**14. our life together is characterized by the gentleness
that is characteristic of the Love which created the universe
and sustains all of life**

**15. we see increasing kindness and compassion
at work in our interactions with one another
and with the world around us**

So much of my understanding of what it means to be human, and hence what it means to be a truly human community (ie. "church"), is shaped by Genesis 1:27 where we are told that

**God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them.**

There is that within every human being which bears the stamp of our Creator. At no point in the Bible are we ever told that this “image” of God in which we were created has been eliminated or wiped out. We may wander away from this “image” of our deepest selves. We may become unconscious of our true identity. We may lose our connection with this beautiful reality of our created nature. But at no time is it ever eradicated.

The function of church then is to be a place in which we are called back to an awareness of our true nature. We exist to be a place in which we are reminded of the people we truly are and are given the opportunity to practice living in community from that deep knowledge that we share a common identity with all humans as beings created in the image of God.

We seek to trust the truth and beauty at the core of every human life. We meet one another beginning with “Yes” trusting that each person is seeking to live from that deep inner prompting of God’s truth and light at work in their life and therefore is worthy of being granted the space and freedom to live in tune with their deepest calling.

As we renew our connection with our true inner nature, we will be less controlled by the demands and expectations of external forces. We will find the freedom to live with integrity, honesty, and courage, regardless of the response of the outside world.

The more conscious we are of our inherent connection to God, the more we will live as the children we were created to be. Our lives will increasingly take the shape of that love, kindness, and compassion that are our true nature. We do not have to manufacture these qualities. They are our truest identity.

When we live together with love and compassion, we are simply being our true selves.

This is why Jesus could say,

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

It is not a “heavy burden” to be the people we were created to be. When we live in tune with our true nature, our lives come into harmony with the reality of who we are. We are able to live the restful lives for which our hearts most deeply long. We are carried by the energy flow of the universe which is the presence of God at work in all of life.

Vision Qualities of Church 2017 with Commentary #4

I hope that in our community:

**we are increasingly open and flexible
honouring structures and traditions that serve human flourishing
and letting go of any that hinder the flow of life**

**we are willing to let go of our small personal agendas
in service to the greater well-being
of the whole community**

**our lives are characterized by the generosity
that flows naturally from a life of gratitude
and an awareness of abundance**

**we are being equipped in all our relationships
to live more authentically and gently,
with greater honesty and humility**

**we acknowledge our common brokenness
and admit our failure to live fully
the luminous reality for which we were created**

If a church is going to exist as an identifiable community, it must have coherent boundaries and parameters that give definition and shape to its common life. As a Christian church, we operate within certain structural realities that forge our common identity. Our life together is based on traditions that form our community and establish us as a recognizable body of faith.

But, Jesus made it clear that, structures and traditions are to be a framework, not a straight jacket. Confronted by rigid traditionalism and the unbending demands of those who were locked into certain beliefs and practices, Jesus said,

The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath. (Mark 2:27)

As long as traditions and structures are life-giving in our current context, we honour and respect the coherence they provide. As soon as they become binding and rigid, we seek to gently let them go and find new ways to nurture and express the life of the Spirit we seek to embody.

Fear can keep us bound to patterns that are no longer vehicles for life. When we lose our awareness of the abundance to which traditions are intended to open us, we lose our ability to flow naturally with the Spirit that is the source of our vitality as a community.

God's Spirit did not set things going in a long-ago era and then abandon us to plod along in bondage to established practices, dogmas, and language formulations that are no longer able to carry the gift of truth and light for which they were originally adopted. When practices of the past cease to be effective

vehicles in the present, we abandon them, no matter how reassuring they may be for those of us who are tempted to cling to the comforting protection of their familiarity.

When we continue to cling to patterns that hinder the flow of the Spirit, we will soon cease to live authentically and gently. Our determination to hang on at all costs to old habits will cause us to lose touch with people who were not raised with the practices and beliefs of our communal life.

We need to acknowledge that all external structures imperfectly embody our attempts to create a system able to help us open to an awareness of the presence of God. The structures and traditions we create are not absolute. Love is the only absolute.

As John says,

God is love. (1 John 4:8)

Everything we do is intended to facilitate the practice of love. We will joyfully sacrifice anything that might get in the way of our hearts opening to love.