



St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

February 9, 2021

Dear People of St. Stephen's,

For a couple of years now, I have had a growing sense that something was coming to a close in my life and something new was beckoning. And although it has been one of the greatest honors of my life to serve as your rector since 2005, I will conclude this incredible chapter of my life and ministry on April 30 of this year, midway through the season of Easter.

It has been terribly emotional for me to ponder this change, and even more emotional for me to write to you about it. In fact, I have written several letters to you, and none of them (including this one) articulates what is in my heart and mind. I will always love you and be grateful for the privilege you bestowed on me by inviting me to come alongside you for nearly 16 years, as we have witnessed the Spirit doing amazing things in our midst. Even in (perhaps *especially* in) a pandemic.

From 2005 forward, the Episcopal Church nationally has undergone a period of unprecedented decline, while St. Stephen's during that same time blossomed and flourished. Teams of church leaders from across the country have come to see what was going on here, and they have always left remarking, in one way or another, on how generous, open, and welcoming our parishioners are—there is a palpable spirit of healing, kindness, and compassion at St. Stephen's, they would tell me. Our gifted staff and clergy also never failed to impress visitors with their commitment to serve and empower others. And this sense of generous teamwork and service has only increased during the pandemic. The foundation here, cultivated for generations, is strong.

So you can imagine how difficult it is for me to move on to this next chapter, but I confess that it also feels right and good. As you've heard me say before, when we encounter a paradox like this, there is likely something holy going on. So ultimately, I hope and trust that you will rejoice with me, though at times it will look as if I am far from rejoicing!

I have concluded that it is time for me to establish a new rhythm of life with my family and friends, and I am very excited about that. In June, my amazing wife, Cherry, and I will have been married 40 years; and although Cherry will continue her work as a nurse practitioner, I sense new opportunities for us as a couple and as parents of three wonderful, adult children. In addition, my mother suffers from severe dementia, and I sense I might soon have new roles with her and my siblings. And finally, I have several good friends who have done the lion's share of the work to sustain our friendship for years.

Although after April 30 I will no longer be your rector, I am still interested in how I might serve the larger church going forward. Recent conversations with clergy friends across the country who have thirty years or more of experience have energized me. These friends have incredible wisdom, insight, and passion for supporting the amazing younger clergy who are now coming into important leadership positions in the Episcopal Church (St. Stephen's is especially blessed that way). Other possible collaborations and ministry projects have also surfaced; but for now, I simply want to be patient—time and prayer will reveal what is next, what has been beckoning for a while now.

I have shared this news in detail with our incredible wardens, Allison Koschak and Lynn Ivey, as well as with other vestry leaders and our bishop, and they have all been very supportive, which has been so humbling and gratifying. I feel deeply cared for. And the church staff—words cannot express my love, admiration, and gratitude for each of them. How fortunate St. Stephen's is.

I am hoping that well before April 30, conditions will allow me to speak with groups of parishioners in person. It is important to me to have this final opportunity to speak with you and thank you in person. So, please stay tuned.

I can never thank you enough for the privilege of serving as rector of St. Stephen's for nearly 16 of my 36 years of parish ministry, and I know I cannot adequately express how important I think St. Stephen's Church is for the health and well-being of people in Richmond, as well as for many people far beyond. Nor, finally, can I articulate how abundantly blessed I believe St. Stephen's is to have the clergy and staff it has. But I intend to try.

The Peace of the Lord be always with you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "G" and a long, sweeping tail.

Gary D. Jones
Rector