

As he walks by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sees the brothers Simon and Andrew, who are busy casting their nets, hoping to catch fish. And then two more, the sons of Zebedee, James and his brother John. They too are fishermen, and Jesus finds them in their boats mending their nets. These four immediately leave their nets and follow him. Jesus tells them that they will still be fishing, only now they will be fishing for people.

Since today is the day of our **congregational meeting**, I'm going to focus on how this passage applies to all of us here at St Peter's.

Jesus has called us to be his followers. So here we are, approximately **forty-eight people, thirty-five of us actively involved in the mission and ministry of this church**. We are small in number, but mighty in what we do as followers of Jesus. What I am going to say now will serve as our annual report for the year just past, 2023.

We are the ones that Jesus has called not only to believe in the Good News, but also to proclaim the Good News. The time has drawn near, and we don't have any time to waste. The world needs this good news, not just news about someone doing something kind, although that news is important. *This* good news is about specifically turning toward Jesus, finding a new way to go that differs from the ways that the world offers, and following Jesus in trust and hope, believing that not only does God have a place prepared for us when we die, but that God's kingdom is here and now, life changing, that new life is not only a possibility but a reality, if only we follow him where he would have us go.

And the good news is that this new life is available not just to us, but to all people who will follow. Imagine! If people believe this good news and follow, God's kingdom will become much more a reality on this earth than it is currently.

The Good News is ours to share! Jesus' trust in *us* to share this news is a huge, undeserved gift. So out of gratitude, we want to carry the Good News out into the world.

Even though the disciples left their fishing nets behind when they followed Jesus, they still needed the skills they had learned—casting their nets and mending their nets.

Both casting nets and mending nets are necessary parts of discipleship. As disciples, we must cast our nets but we also must mend our nets as well. Here are some of the ways we have been both casting and mending the nets that Jesus has given to us to use here at St Peter's.

Jesus fed the hungry and asked us to do the same thing. **The Village Harvest**, our food distribution, is one of the major ways that we cast the Lord's nets out into the community. In any given month, seven to ten people here at St Peter's work to make food available to those in need—and we provide food for an average of about 90 people a month. This physical work of going to the food bank, loading the truck, unloading it, sorting and packing the food, and distributing food would be impossible without all of those of you who donate money to this project, and these donations come from people outside the church as well. This project is completely funded by donations. A sign of your generosity—at the end of 2023 we had almost \$1750 in our Village Harvest fund, which will help us to cover the purchases of food in the coming months. We get the food from our partner, the Healthy Harvest Food Bank. Even though we get the food at a much lower price at the food bank, we still have to buy the food, so your funding is crucial in order for us to cast out the nets that help to address hunger in this county and beyond.

Have you ever wondered what happens to the fresh food that we have left over? That food gets taken over to the **Caroline County Social Services** food pantry in Bowling Green—a way that we partner with Social Services.

Another important way that we cast out the Lord's nets in conjunction with Social Services is to support their Thanksgiving and Christmas projects for people in need in this county. We do this through the **ECM** collection for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Again, your financial generosity is a way to cast the Lord's nets out into the world.

We also partner with Social Services in some other ways. We participate in **CERVE**, a group of churches in Caroline County who work with Social Services and the Sheriff's Department to provide emergency help to people in Caroline County. We are the only church in this part of the county involved in this group, and our presence is important in maintaining a link with the churches across the county.

The Caroline County Public School System holds family nights periodically throughout the year, and we get to support them through your generosity in bringing snacks and other supplies. Also, we help the school system through **Caroline's Promise**, providing school supplies for their school supply distribution that takes place each year right before school starts.

We also cast our nets through the annual **Shred-It** project. People come to St Peter's for a needed service that is not otherwise available in this part of the county. And their donations help us in turn.

This past year we cast out nets out to college students at **The House**, the Episcopal ministry to students and faculty at the University of Mary Washington and to Germanna. The Episcopal Church Women did the cooking and provided dinner for the students and we got to spend some time with them. The ECW also made many donations to groups out the world who are casting their own nets on God's behalf.

We cast our nets abroad by partnering with **The Victoria School** in Jamaica, providing needed supplies, educational funds, tablets for the students and computers for the school with the help of people in Andrea's family not directly connected with the church. And money has also been made available for the school to provide breakfast for students who would otherwise come to school hungry.

Our outdoor **Christmas pageant** is another way to cast a net out into the community, making a central story about Jesus come alive for the people who came to witness the story of his birth. And one thing I love about that net casting is that people in the community wanted to participate—two angels flew in, and we even had a resident of Caroline County bring his goats to be part of the pageant.

One new way that we are casting nets is through helping to provide **a weekly Eucharist to the people at Chancellor's Village**. I go at least once a month to celebrate the Eucharist for a group of Episcopalian residents, and this year we St Peter's people may decide to go as a group to provide a time of fellowship afterward for the people there who attend.

Having our services available on YouTube is another way to cast the Lord's nets out into the world, making our worship available any time for anyone who would like to join in from anywhere in the world. Paying for Breezeline is an added expense that we have taken on, but it is essential for this 21st century net casting that we are called to do. In addition to putting our worship services online, Ben also has created a website that serves as a huge resource for education, and helping people to grow in faith and knowledge in addition to exhaustively documenting our life together here at St Peter's.

I've talked so far about how we cast our nets as we fish for people with whom we can share the good news.

But just as important is net mending. Nets and the people who cast the nets need care to keep themselves and the nets in optimal working order.

And so we mend our nets when we come together to **worship** each Sunday. To get to praise God together, to hear God's word, to pray together, to sing together and to participate in the Eucharist—this is the most important net mending that we do each week, and this is why I try to make sure that our worship service is one that people will want to attend, because they find some strength and encouragement for the week ahead in the time we have spent together praising God. And all of you pitch in to make our liturgy happen. Don't forget that the definition of the word liturgy is "the work of the people." Lectors, chalice bearers, ushers, music makers, bread bakers, altar tending, flower arrangers, and those of you who show up to worship and to participate—every one of us here makes worship possible and meaningful for all of us each week. We are grateful to have Tom and Alice Hughes bringing their talents to our church and pitching in. They have both been a blessing.

Education is another way that we mend our nets. Our weekly lectionary Bible study, which has gone on for years now, is a central way for us to learn, and in doing so, to strengthen our nets. This past year we had a class on the Psalms, and best of all, people have come together to have a class for our youngest children from ages five to nine. This kind of strengthening our nets, through education and participation in worship by our children, is of the utmost importance. I'm glad that we have had some growth in this area this past year, especially after the isolation that Covid created.

We support one another and mend our nets when we **care for one another** by making calls, sending cards, visiting and showing our care for each other in a variety of ways. What we do for one another strengthens not only the recipient, but the giver as well.

Praying together is another net mending activity. We have an active prayer list, and in addition we pray for people in our church and community each week in Bible Study. Also, this past year, we had a prayer vigil that focused on the war in Gaza, a way to remember that we must turn to God in these challenging times and not become discouraged or to lose faith when God's kingdom ever coming on this earth can seem so improbable in these dire situations.

One net mending project that we have created at St Peter's is the group that we call Sacred Ground, committed to learning more about racism (mending our own nets) and to then to get creative about faithfully creating ways in which we can be part of dismantling racism in this country (mending nets out in the world). A direct result of this net mending is **The Sacred Ground Scholarship**, which this year is helping three students at Germanna Community College go to trade school without incurring debt, so that when they graduate

and work in their new trade, they will be able to do so debt free. We have been able to do this by actively partnering with the administration at Germanna Community College.

None of this casting and mending would be possible without your presence and also your financial support. Net mending this year has included the physical mending of our buildings, big unexpected expenses—new furnaces for both buildings, repairing termite damage and painting. We had several trees that had to be either removed or severely pruned this year. Here I want to thank Cookie Davis, our Junior Warden, and Johnny Davis, who have been nothing short of heroic in dealing with all of the emergencies in our buildings and on our grounds that we have faced this past year.

In the interest of time for right now, I am going to save more specific information about our budget for a discussion immediately after this service for those who are interested. We'll take a look at the budget and explain more specifically what pots your money goes in and how we spend your money in order to cast and mend nets as the disciples of Jesus in the 21st century.

Here's some encouraging information for all of us to consider as we move forward into this coming year. Church Growth Magazine has recently put out an article about where the Church in North America is heading and what the implications are.

The writer, Dr. J. R. Briggs, divides his article into three sections; sociological, ecclesiological and missiological, and then points out important trends in each section. Then he talks about the ways in which churches will manage not only to survive but to thrive in our times in which the church faces unprecedented challenges.

Sociologically, churches will become more and more digital. Good for us, a tiny church in an isolated part of Caroline County, for recognizing this reality and getting on board, as painful and annoying as that process has been. We must maintain and grow our digital presence while keeping the reality of all we do together in person strong and sustaining.

Honoring people as the children of God and helping them navigate their shame, and to "offer a robust, thoughtful and faithful holiness." Briggs says that this sort of holiness will be free from "legalism and moralistic elitism, but instead full of a faithfulness to honor God more fully." I believe that here at St Peter's we have moved more and more toward faithful holiness (just think of all the ways that we cast our nets out into the world). But this is an area that we must always continue to work on, for legalism and moral elitism are always temptations that we must resist. Jesus teaches us that the two greatest

commandments are to love God with our whole heart and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Inviting and welcoming people to be with us in their brokenness is of the utmost importance. Think about it. We are all broken in one way or another. So let us be kind to one another and accepting and willing to suffer some discomfort with the hope that someone who has not found a home anywhere else may find a home with us here.

Ecclesiologically, Briggs says that **people long to practice their faith, not just talk about it**. We have so many ways for people to practice their faith, and in addition, we welcome others who practice their faith alongside us as friends and participants in our ministries, even if they never show up for worship.

And here's some information that made my heart sing, for us anyway. **One big trend is that church sizes are becoming more polarized.** In the future, Brigg believes, there will be either megachurches or very small churches. Middle-sized churches are the ones that will disappear. Well, here we are, a small church all set to carry out our role in the years ahead. We are already small and dynamic. The shrinking we have experienced is part of the ongoing trend of movement toward either big or small. I don't know about you, but there's nowhere I'd rather be than in a small church as a place to worship and practice faith. And another trend is that in this age of unrootedness, people will desire more and more to return to their roots, to worship with liturgy that has old, deep, and strong foundations on which people have built their faith for centuries—the Eucharist, the church year, the lectionary, familiar ways of worship for us, but also a way of worship that can welcome in others who want rootedness and to be grounded in faith that includes the communion of saints who continue to worship with us, even though they are in the company of heaven. We do not need a praise band to offer what the world needs from the church in the years to come. People will want to be part of something older and bigger than they are. We can continue to provide that way of worship, knowing how powerful that offering can be.

Here's an area in which we can grow. Spiritual mentoring and apprenticeship—this can be a growing edge for our church. We can give more attention to helping people develop spiritually, in addition to providing ways for people to practice their faith.

And here's the last thing I want to reference from the missiological section of Briggs' article. Leaders will continue to band together outside of their denominational affiliations. The more we partner with those outside our walls, both with agencies and with other churches, the better.

So here we are, at the beginning of 2024, well situated to be a church that continues to thrive well into this coming century, a group of faithful disciples in an increasingly hostile world. We are the ones who have said yes, who have decided to follow Jesus and who have laid down our own nets to pick up the nets that Jesus is asking us to cast and to mend in order to proclaim the good news of Jesus out in the world.

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.

So may we rejoice. Let's repent of our doubts and the temptation to hopelessness and to truly believe this good news. Jesus goes with us. So may we faithfully follow in gratitude to God for this church and for one another and look with joy and expectation to all that is ahead as we cast and mend the nets that Jesus has given us to use for God's glory and for God's kingdom to come on this earth.

Resource: [The Church in North America is Changing. Are You Ready?](#)

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