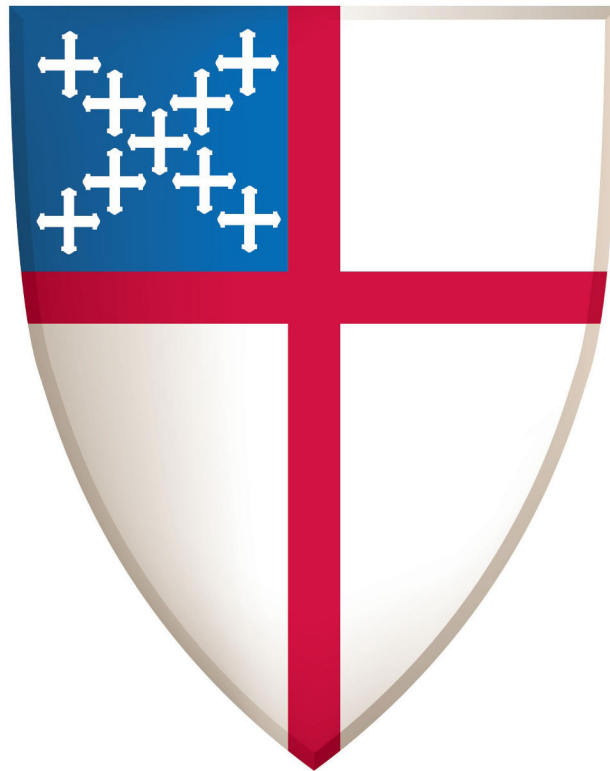

From Membership to Discipleship

Growing in Faith at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church



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St. Stephen's Parish Mission Prayer

*Heavenly Father, we ask you to help us fulfill our mission,
to worship you in a loving community,
to support people on their Christian journey,
and to empower disciples for service,
so that we can bring Jesus to each other and to the world.
Amen.*

Welcome!

At St. Stephen's Episcopal Church we pray that each member of our congregation will take seriously their Christian vocation as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Prior to His Ascension to the Right Hand of the Father, Jesus commanded the Disciples; "***Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.***" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Each of us has been given the blessing and responsibility of following this command. For many Christians though, the path of discipleship has not always been clear, especially within the context of the life of a congregation. The leadership of St. Stephen's has compiled the following areas of discipleship, based on the Albany Episcopal Diocese "Marks of Discipleship"* as a guide to help each of us continue to grow in knowledge of love of God.

In the following pages are highlighted the main areas of discipleship in our parish. These are not simply 'checkmarks' along the way though. We are to continue engaging in each area of discipleship, as it is a lifelong process and adventure. The three areas of discipleship in our parish are; **Encountering, Educating** and **Engaging**.

Our hope is that this guide will help new members, and those who are lifelong members of St. Stephen's to embrace the call and command to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

**For more information about the Albany Diocese Marks of Discipleship, please visit:
<http://www.albanyepiscopaldiocese.org/documents/Marks.html>*

Membership

When someone visits St. Stephen's for the first time, and they decide that our congregation could be their spiritual home, often they will ask the question; 'what do I /we have to do to join?' or "how do I/we become members?" These types of questions in the past often led to rather simple answers that did not lead to a greater sense of identity as part of the parish family. Often it was said that to become a member, simply one would just show up, continue to show up and make a pledge to the congregation. St. Stephen's is a growing and vibrant parish, and this often would not help visitors or newcomers to understand the excitement of being part of the parish family. The leadership of the parish took a serious look at the real expectations of our parishioners and believe the following are the 'marks' of a member of St. Stephen's besides participating in the worship of the Church.

- **The Baptismal Covenant.** The Baptismal Covenant is the promises that we make before God and the community when we are baptized into the Church, the Body of Christ. For some, they are old enough to make these promises on their own. In the case of infant baptism, these promises are made by the parents, godparents and congregation on behalf of the infant. St. Stephen's has produced a pamphlet on the Baptismal Covenant to help us understand our greater membership in the Church. Please speak with a clergy person or vestry member if you would like one of these pamphlets.
- **The Authority of Holy Scripture** in our lives. Holy Scripture contains all thing necessary for salvation. We know the Bible to be the living Word of God. A challenge to read at times, the pages of the Bible to convey to us God's love and his purposes for our lives as disciples. Daily reading of the Bible helps us to remain faithful to God and is a hallmark of the Christian faith.

Encountering

Worship

Prayer

Scripture

Stewardship

Encountering Worship

Worship



*Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness:
Come let us adore him. — Psalm 96:9*

Q. What is corporate worship?

A. In corporate worship, we unite ourselves with others to acknowledge the holiness of God, to hear God's Word, to offer prayer, and to celebrate the sacraments.

(Catechism, Book of Common Prayer, pg. 857)

We are a worshipping community at St. Stephen's. That is our primary purpose as a Christian body, to gather together to offer God our praise and thanksgiving.

The Church exists on earth, as the Body of Christ to glorify God! We encounter the Living Presence of our Living God in our worship.

Worship is not just about 'showing up to church' but it is how we show God his value to us as his creation. When we worship we are honoring, glorifying and giving thanks to our Father in Heaven. We also hold one another accountable in faith when we gather as the community of believers.

Worship is when we hear God's Word proclaimed and explained. Worship is when we receive Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Worship is when we pray with and for one another, and it is also a way that we gather in fellowship.

At St. Stephen's, as part of the Anglican / Episcopal tradition, our worship is rooted in the ancient and mysterious liturgy of the Ancient Church. Every Sunday we celebrate the Lord's Supper as we sing hymns and songs of praise.

Some of the ways in which disciples can encounter God in a deeper way through worship are by participating in ministries such as; singing with the Choir and Music Ministry, serving as Acolytes, Crucifers (carrying the processional cross), Chalice Bearers, Lectors (proclaiming God's Word) and serving as Ushers and Greeters.

While Sunday Worship is our primary time for corporate worship, we worship daily at St. Stephen's following the Daily Office of Morning and Evening Prayer, as well as celebrating Holy Communion on several feast days.

Encountering Prayer

Prayer



*The LORD is near to those who call upon him,
to all who call upon him faithfully.—Psalm 145:19*

Q. What is prayer?

A. Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.

Q. What is Christian Prayer?

A. Christian prayer is response of God the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

(Catechism, Book of Common Prayer, pg. 856)

As Christians, we pray to God because He loves us and we love Him and we want to be in conversation with Him. Those whom we love most in this life we want to spend time with, share our lives with them, and talk to them about our love for them and our hopes, needs and desires. God our Creator is no different. He wants to spend time with us and we too want to spend time with Him.

Jesus, as we are told in the Gospels, would rise early in the morning to go out to a deserted place and spend time with the Father in prayer. Jesus also prayed for his disciples (John 17), he prayed before eating (the miracle of the loaves and fishes), and he even prays for us (Romans 7:25). Jesus is the model of the Christian prayer life.

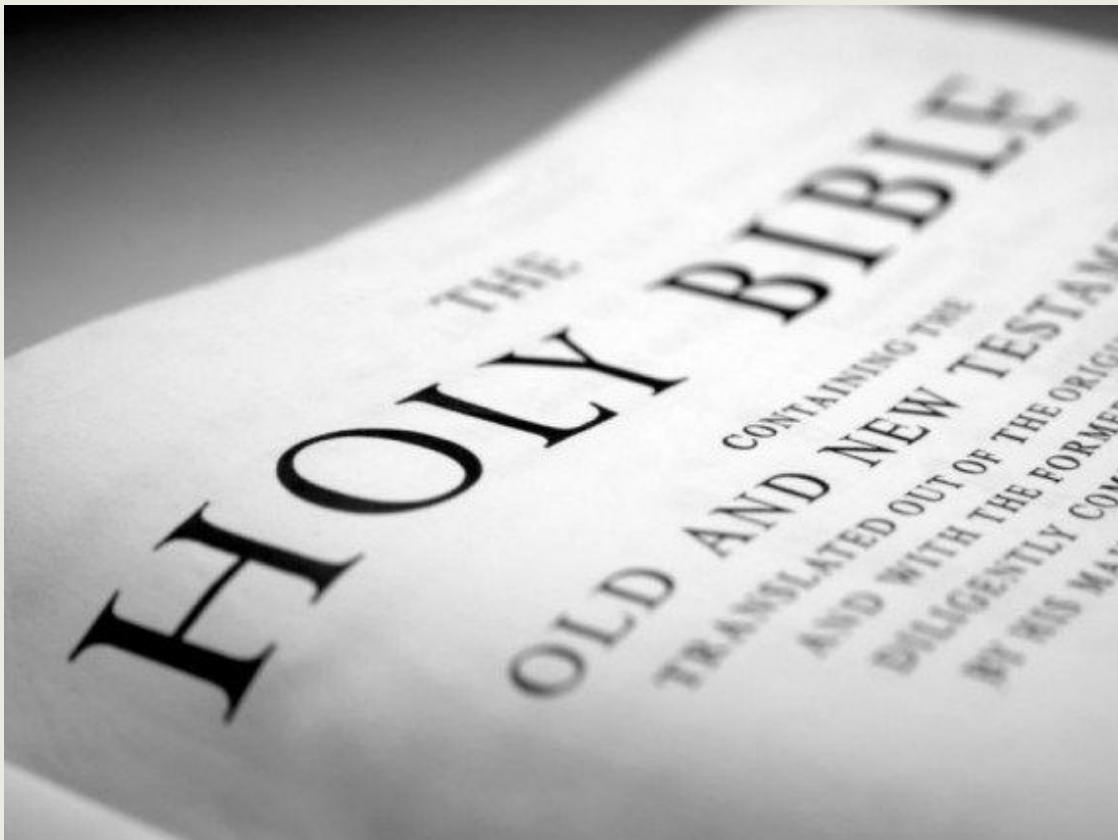
In our daily life we pray, not only for those things we need, as taught in the Lord's Prayer, but we also pray for others. Through intercessory prayer we offer up prayers for those loved ones, friends and even the stranger we meet on the street.

Healing prayer is offered each Sunday following worship by our healing prayer team members. At St. Stephen's, we have many parishioners who have been blessed by the prayers of others.

Prayer is powerful! There are other types of prayers. Meditation, Lectio Divina (praying through the scripture) and of course, prayers of Praise and Thanksgiving, which is our spiritual sacrifice each and every Sunday morning. We are also blessed with a chapter of the Daughters of the King, whose ministry it is to pray for the parish.

Encountering Scripture

Scripture



*Your word is a lantern to my feet
and a light upon my path. - Psalm 119:105*

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.

(Article VI of the XXXIX Articles of Religion, Book of Common Prayer, pg. 868)

Do you struggle to truly know God? Many people have spent a life time sitting in Church pews wondering about God. Is he really there? What does he really want for his creation? Are the stories of Jesus true? Most of these questions may go unanswered in the life of a disciple if they never pick up the Bible and begin to read the story of God, humanity and salvation.

It was the intent of the Protestant Reformers and the English Reformers to have these questions answered for the faithful of the Church. This of course led to a renewed sense of the power of Holy Scripture. The Bible directs us as the followers of Jesus. The Bible helps us to understand our lives and roles as disciples. No, the Bible does not contain an answer for every question in life, but it gives us all we need to be confident about God and our salvation.

The Bible is not to be seen as merely a book. The Bible is the Word of God, a living story that is supposed to build us up, prepare us for ministry, comfort us in Grace and Hope. That is why at St. Stephen's we have taken upon ourselves the blessed task of making sure the truths of Scripture are revealed and that our hearts are opened as well to receive God's unfolding truth and revelation.

As a parish we have accomplished several challenges to help the Bible come to life. The E100, the Essential Jesus, "The Story" and The Bible Challenge. *For more information please visit our parish website which has links for each of these programs.*

Small group Bible Studies are one of the ways in which we support one another as we partake of God's Holy Word. This allows us to share our questions, joys and even doubts and concerns. The Bible is not the easiest read, but by supporting each other, we know it is a blessed journey. We share the following prayer for each day as you read through the pages of Holy Scripture from Thomas Cranmer:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of your Holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Encountering Stewardship

Stewardship



*The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it,
the world and all who dwell therein. - Psalm 24:1*

The word, *stewardship*, simply means to manage someone else's property. For the Christian, as Scripture proclaims everything belongs to God, we manage the property of our Lord. Since everything belongs to Christ, we need to have the attitude and view that our things are His things, our stuff is His stuff, that all we could have now, all we have lost, all we will have, is His, including our very bodies and spiritual gifts. We are mere lessees of the property, money, relationships, talents, time, and even our lives. That means all that we are and all that we have are not really ours to begin with. They belong to God. So, the duty of the Christian is to learn how to become responsible stewards of our Lord's resources entrusted into our care. It means to manage everything to the best of our abilities for His glory

“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it” (Malachi 3:10)

The word *generosity*, means that we acknowledge that God owns everything and that we, as the great recipients of his grace and love, enjoy the privilege of participating in God's care for others. Biblically, this movement of generosity tends to give particular attention to the poor, oppressed, and all who are in need. Ultimately, we become givers by gazing at the gift of Christ who provides the supreme revelation of God's generosity to us in his self-giving death on the cross. Extending ourselves to others through sacrificial service, love, and gift is not something we do out of guilt or fear, but out of the joy that in this way we, as God's children, are being conformed ever more into the image of God in Christ.

“For if you give, you will get! Your gift will return to you in full and overflowing measure, pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, and running over. Whatever measure you use to give -- large or small -- will be used to measure what is given back to you.” (Luke 6:38)

At St. Stephen's we preach and teach the Biblical Standard of the Tithe as the expectation of all disciples. Each year we participate in a season of stewardship where we ask ourselves; “how much of my treasure, time and talent do I give to God, and how much more should I give?”

Educating

Bible Study

Spiritual Gifts

Sunday School

Continuing Christian Education

Educating Bible Study

Bible Study



*Your word is a lantern to my feet
and a light upon my path. - Psalm 119:105*

The term “Bible Study” may be the second most intimidating term after “Evangelism”. But really, it shouldn’t be. If our lives may challenge and test us at times, still God has provided us the answers within the pages of the Holy Bible. More simply put, the Bible can be thought of as: **Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.**

Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* In Romans 15:4, he elaborates further, *“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.”*

Not only does God give us the “big picture” by telling us about Himself and His plan for the salvation of humanity, but He also gives us more immediate guidance for managing the details of our daily lives.

Deuteronomy 6:6-7 instructs us: *“These commandments ... are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”*

At St. Stephen’s we practice this teaching through our many Bible study groups. Whether you prefer a men’s group, women’s group or a mixed group, there are many opportunities to explore God’s Word together. A range of approaches are used; from lectionary-based studies to topical studies, or even cover-to-cover studies. Biblical expertise is not required or expected, the important point is to discover what God is revealing to us. Regardless of where we are in our faith journey, we can all benefit from studying and learning together.

Educating Spiritual Gifts

Spiritual Gifts



*They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither;
everything they do shall prosper. - Psalm 1:3*

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work... All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.”

(1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 11)

Just as it takes varying talents and abilities to form a successful baseball team, it takes Christians with varying talents and abilities (spiritual gifts) to form a Christian Community, to grow in faith helping and serving one another. Just as all the players on the team work together to a common goal, as members of Christ's church, we share the common goal to bring Jesus to each other and the world. We meet that common goal through the use of our own gifts from the Holy Spirit.

Each of us is given at least one spiritual gift from the Holy Spirit; we have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. We need to discern if our gift is service, then how can we serve; if it is teaching, then let us teach; if it is to encourage, then we need to encourage others; if it is giving, then we should give generously; if it is to lead, we will do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, we do it cheerfully; if it prophesying, so that we can prophesy in accordance with our faith.

As a Christian community, we use our gifts together to help others as God would have us, serving others through our faith in Jesus Christ. At St. Stephen's, we have various programs and methods to help each other learn more about spiritual gifts and how we can discern how to serve the parish and the world through the gifts God has given each of us.

“The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ.” *(1 Corinthians 12:12)*

Educating Sunday School

Sunday School



*I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you
should go; I will guide you with my eye. - Psalm 32:9*

At St. Stephen's, we believe that the phrase "the children are the Church's future" is not how we should go about Church, worship and education for our youngest disciples. The children are just as part of the Body of Christ today as they will be as adults. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says; **"Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are like these children."** (*Matthew 19:14*). Too often, Sunday School has become more about entertainment than true prayer and education.

At St. Stephen's we focus on Biblical messages, memorization of Scripture verses, and relationship building.

All of the curricula used at St. Stephen's has been developed by parents and parishioners of the Church under the supervision of the Clergy. This has produced biblically accurate teaching, and biblically minded young disciples in our parish family.

Children are encouraged to begin worship with their parents, and there is always a Children's Message prior to dismissal to Sunday School. Our Sunday School lessons are engaging, based on the Sunday Lectionary (appointed Bible readings of the day), and there is time for prayer and reflection. It is our hope that parents and children will continue the conversation about the Bible and the particular theme or message beyond their time at Church.

"Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." (*Proverbs 22:6*)

Pre-K through 4th grade gather upstairs, dismissed at 10:40, and return at the Sign of the Peace during the Liturgy. Middle School and High School gather at 9:30am.

Educating

Continuing Christian Education

Continuing Christian Education



*Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I
may learn your commandments. - Psalm 119:73*

“Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding.” (Proverbs 4:1)

“Teach them to your children and to their children after them.”
(Deuteronomy 4:9)

Christian education must not just be thought of in the context of children's education. Rather it is a continuum beginning with the education of children and moving through adulthood yea even 'till death. To develop total trust in Jesus we must throw our “self” away and let him take control of every aspect of our life to develop a deep personal relationship with Him. A personal Prayer life coupled with guidance and structured support from the Parish will provide a foundation for this true relationship with Jesus.

At St. Stephen's we have many opportunities for Christian Ed. There's something for everyone; toddlers, teens and all generations are able to participate in Christian Ed. We offer Sunday School classes for Pre-K through Confirmation preparation, a Newcomer's Class for both new and current parishioners, adult Christian Ed between Sunday services led by our Rector and numerous Bible and book studies offered throughout the week. Additional opportunities for adult Christian Ed are continually being developed to expand the current environment in which personal and lifelong spiritual growth will take place through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:7-10)

Engaging

Evangelism

Mission and Service

Fellowship

Engaging Evangelism

Evangelism



*Therefore will I extol you among the nations, O LORD,
and sing praises to your Name. - Psalm 18:49*

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”
(Matthew 28:19-20)

Evangelism is sharing the Good News; that Jesus came to save us all. All Christians are called to follow Jesus' command to communicate the gospel message. As described in John 3:16, ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*** Specifically, we are to warn others of the consequences of sin and explain that the remedy is repentance and belief in Jesus Christ.

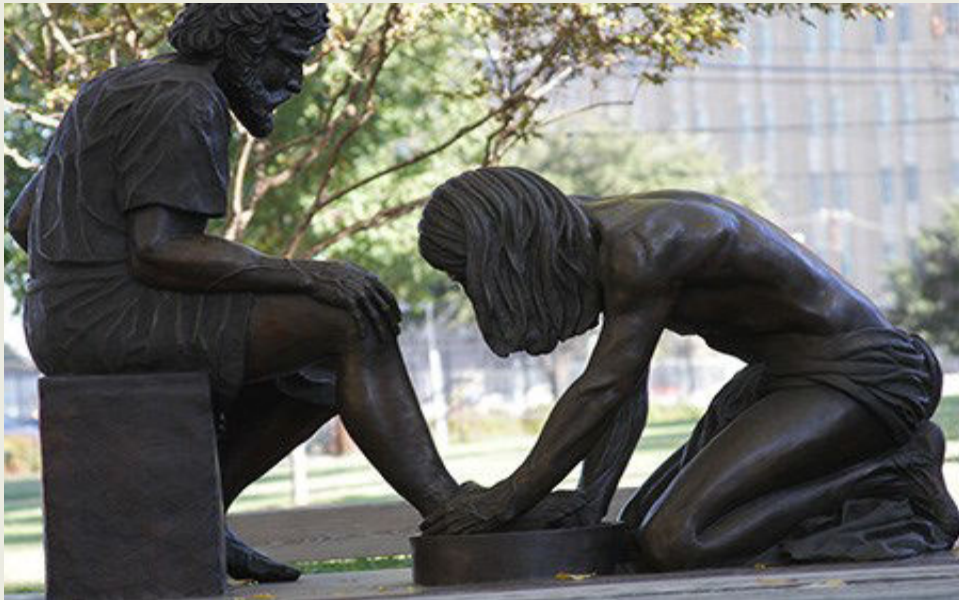
Luke writes in the Acts of the Apostles (1:7-8) ***“He said to them: ‘It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’***

The thought of sharing our faith in Jesus can sometimes be intimidating, perhaps if we envision a street corner evangelist. While that can be a powerful method to bring the Good News to others, there are also many opportunities for us to share in a more personal way. At St. Stephens we invite you to take that step of faith. Share with another person, who is not a Christian, why you follow Jesus, as it is our mission to “bring Jesus to each other and the world.” We strive to build relationships that foster opportunities for conversations to share our faith.

“Light in a messenger’s eyes brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones.” (Proverbs 15:30)

Engaging Mission and Service

Mission and Service



*Declare his glory among the nations
and his wonders among all peoples. - Psalm 96:3*

The word mission is derived from the Latin word *mittere* meaning “to send”.

Clearly, we are all called to mission. Just as clearly, Jesus assists us in fulfilling that call. The mission field is all around us: those we meet at work, at school, in line at the grocery store, on the playing field, etc.

One of the hallmarks of Jesus’ ministry was that of service. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples. This was his way of showing them how they must be willing to serve others within the world.

Our call to mission takes us locally into our community, and abroad. We reach out locally in Albany by serving in the local City Mission, and providing prisoners with copies of the Scriptures. We also take mission trips to other states to those in need. We reach beyond our borders by supporting teachers at an Episcopal School in Haiti.

St. Stephen’s strives to include people of all ages in our Christian ministry of Mission and Service. Children are encouraged to serve others by making crafts and reminders of gratitude for our elderly neighbors. Our older members are encouraged to a ministry of service by reaching out to those in need by providing rides for others and making phone calls to see how people are doing.

Our Mission and Outreach Team meets regularly to discuss our current ministries and to find new ways to provide this important sign of Christian faith to those in our world

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:34,40)

Engaging Fellowship

Fellowship



Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! - Psalm 133:1

"God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:9)

Fellowship is living in union with God and each other, with one common purpose, one Spirit within us. God wants to be in relationship with us and we in turn want to be in relationship with Him and with each other.

"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3)

At St. Stephen's we share similar interests in a congenial atmosphere while striving to support each other on our Christian journey (bringing Jesus to each other and to the world). Fellowship and worshipping God in our community, we strive to build each other up and forgive each other as God forgives us. This requires participation with a common spirit.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42-47)

All of our ministries allow for fellowship opportunities; from our Bible studies, prayer shawl ministry, to our outreach ministries and local gatherings simply to just be together, all of our time together is held by the presence of each other and Jesus.

"If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." (1 John 6-7)

This Booklet was prayerfully created by the Clergy and Vestry of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, 2014.

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