

St Peter's Episcopal Church Harrisonville, Missouri

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Background

St. Peter's in Harrisonville is searching for a full-time priest to serve as rector of the parish. After many years of conducting Sunday services with priests supplied by the Diocese, a five-year grant from an "alumnus" of a long-time St. Peter's family enables us to venture this commitment to a full-time priest with unusual confidence.

Nevertheless, opinions vary as to the wisdom of taking this step. A solid financial footing for St. Peter's has been achieved in the absence of a full-time priest, and that financial security is not to be surrendered. Unflinching volunteer service has preserved the impressive structures and backed the activities that keep St. Peter's engaged with the community, and yet more engagement is needed to attract new members.

Issue

Our growth in membership does not surpass our attrition, and a membership planning process conducted in mid-2019 concluded that what we do on Sundays will not be enough to ensure the endurance of St. Peter's. Greater engagement with the community is the evident strategy for reasserting the relevance of the parish to the lives of Harrisonville and Cass County residents.

The opportunity to instate a full-time rector comes, then, at a juncture in which priestly duties must be accompanied by an ability to become active in the Harrisonville community, a visible reminder of, and invitation to, what St. Peter's has to offer.

This expansion of engagement must be largely self-sustaining. Existing volunteer services are at capacity, and there is concern that the manpower needs of expanded activity cannot be met by existing personnel. Growing volunteer service, then, will have to keep pace with growing commitments.

Requirements

The successful rector of St. Peter's will attract favorable attention and engage with the community, accurately reflecting the value of worship in the Episcopal Church and the unique role of St. Peter's in the life of Harrisonville.

Experience in growing membership of a parish, or assisting directly in such growth, will be a key factor for selection.

Leadership, the ability to communicate a clear vision of success and attract the focused effort to achieve it, will be a vital ingredient in success.

The ability to engage in a digital environment will be a key to St. Peter's success. The evolution of the digital communication sphere was greatly accelerated by stay-home precautions during the global pandemic that developed in 2020. Some of those precautions may become customs of life, and thoughtful congregations project that we might not expect a complete return to the way people attended church before the pandemic.

Church attendance was declining in any case prior to the pandemic. Our planning process revealed that all denominations report declines in Average Sunday Attendance, nationally and locally as well as in this parish.

Therefore, the ability to project services through digital platforms and engage prospective congregants and church members using digital tools will be a key factor for St. Peter's success.

Biblical scholarship is likely to play an important role in the success of St. Peter's among today's alternatives. We have identified an opportunity to reclaim scriptural authority and inspiration, long conceded locally to evangelical and fundamentalist denominations.

The art of worship, the solemnity and beauty of Episcopal liturgy, has been a prominent feature of St. Peter's attraction during successful periods of growth and prominence in the community. The parish has the assets to sustain this, but the talent pool has withered. An ability to conduct worship in a way that makes our traditional forms useful, against the tide of casual, contemporary forms, may prove to be an important factor.

Service is relevance, given the condition and evolution of our town. Harrisonville lags behind the State and the Nation in most measures of economic prosperity. New vitality is seen in town government, but it will take time for this energy to come to its fullest fruition in economic development.

Enabling residents to find what they need here, in the life of St. Peter's, is likely to involve initiatives that serve the community as it is now, rather than model the role St. Peter's played when it was the church of many of Harrisonville's prominent families. A source of clarity and energy, rather than a source of charitable funds, is the form of service at which we seem best qualified.

Younger parishioners and families are needed. The ability to engage them is key. It is not always necessary to mirror the “target audience,” but often it can help.

The successful candidate will be willing to live in Harrisonville. St. Peter’s has a valid claim to being an integral and long-term part of the community, and commuting would fall short of embodying this value.

What to Expect from St. Peter’s

St. Peter’s Episcopal Church is a long-time part of the community in Harrisonville, Missouri, and an established parish of the Episcopal Church, an American Protestant denomination with origins that trace to the early Church, before and after the Reformation.

We offer members, visitors, and neighbors alike a place to breathe easier, open the heart, and make room for spiritual growth. We have found that the best way to offer what the Church provides spiritually is to be engaged in the things people need for everyday life. To be a resource for people’s lives means we reach beyond the Church, to the family and the community. When we are confirmed in the Episcopal Church we pledge “to work and pray and give for the spread of His kingdom.”

Like the worldwide Anglican Communion, and the Episcopal Church, of which we are a part, St. Peter’s work in the world is based on Scripture, Tradition, and Reason (or Discernment).

The Holy Bible is the anchor of our faith and the resource we consult for knowledge and clarification. The traditions of our faith give us context, and they include practices that have proven to help bring imperfect human beings into relationship with the divine. Reason is valued here, because the course of human history shows us a process called discernment - as life goes on people come to greater understanding of God’s ways and the purpose for our lives. Our Anglican understanding is that we have much freedom to order our lives, so the capacity God gave us to reason plays a part in our relationship with Him.

A Place Called Home

It might sound ambitious to call Harrisonville, Missouri, a city, but that’s what the municipal proceedings say, and we support civic affairs, because the well-being of our community promotes the well-being of our neighbors.

More to the point, St. Peter’s belongs to Harrisonville in a most unusual way, because the whole town chipped in to complete this historic structure. The early Episcopalians in Harrisonville met in private homes, and they saved money to build St. Peter’s. When this church went up, in 1895, not only

Episcopalians, but Baptists, Methodists, and Cass County's beloved Mennonite families contributed, it's said. Yes, people of most every denomination - and even some who stayed home Sundays - gave what they could to bring the church you see here now to life. We give back as we have been given.

We never forget to be grateful to this whole town.

The Art of Worship

Some who come to visit us ask why we repeat our liturgy weekly, with seasonal embellishments. "We keep doing it until we get it right." What we are trying to get right is praising God in an act of thanksgiving together.

St. Peter's continues the centuries of human experience that recognized the power of art to open people up to a spiritual connection. We know the feeling of humility and gratitude that comes when we are reminded of things larger than ourselves. Our surroundings here, and the liturgy - or ceremonies - of the Church have that useful effect.

Accepted to the National Register of Historic Places, St. Peter's is built on the traditional "cruciform," or cross-shaped plan, with the altar at the head, the baptismal font at the foot, and the choir and sacristy forming the arms. The style is Tudor Gothic, wedding the late-medieval stone traditions with the half-timbering that came to homes and structures in Elizabethan England.

Stained-glass windows surround the congregation with the play of light that proved to open people's hearts in the cathedrals of the middle ages. The archangel window above the baptismal font at the south end of St. Peter's is said reliably to be a genuine work of Louis Comfort Tiffany, rescued and donated from a church in Kansas City that was slated for demolition. It's said that the woodwork of St. Peter's would be impossible to duplicate today.

The Ways of Worship

Every Sunday St. Peter's celebrates the sacrament of Holy Communion. It's a church service that traces back to Christ's instructions to, "Do this in remembrance of me." It's called Communion because it joins us together with each other and all that came before us.

The ceremony itself is based on the rituals of the early Church, and followed still by the liturgical churches; Anglican, Lutheran, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic. The words chosen when the service was translated to English came from an Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer was not only a priest but also a poet. He lived just before the time of Shakespeare, and you

can see in his work the legendary love of language we associate with that Elizabethan age.

In 1979 a more contemporary reading of the Communion service, called Rite II was adopted. The language is more inclusive, and it sounds more familiar to everyday speech. Rite II reflects a growing sensitivity to individual human experience that came from centuries of God's ongoing guidance, which we call discernment. We practice both Rite I and Rite II at St. Peter's.

The Music of Worship

The music in our services comes from a hymnal published in 1982 for the purpose of speaking to the Church of the future as well as the traditions of our past. Episcopal hymnals date to the very beginnings of the United States - the first was published in 1789 - and this collection of ceremonial music has been updated seven times so far. Always the effort is to get the best from both our heritage and our active, involved experience of life.

Some of the hymns that make the old-timers feel at home came from classical composers like George Frederic Handel. Others reflect the ongoing evolution of music, from living composers like Malcom Archer, who has been Director of Music at St. Paul's in London.

It's true that there's a tendency for the music of the Episcopal Church to sound stately. And yet familiar, contemporary, Protestant hymns find their way into the service at St. Peter's on a regular basis.

The Life of Service

We believe that work is one of the ways of knowing God and sharing that relationship with others, so we look for ways to serve the community in which we are fortunate to live.

The Food Pantry in Harrisonville is called "The Shepherd's Staff," and it is a project of the Harrisonville Ministerial Alliance, in which we are glad to take part. You're likely to meet a few of us there helping out.

Civic affairs are of interest to St. Peter's, as an integral part of Harrisonville. One such endeavor, "Love the Square," meets regularly in our Parish house, Spencer Hall, to facilitate economic development via Harrisonville's historic Courthouse Square.

Recovery from addictions and abusive relationships is an important part of life for many people today. St. Peter's particularly welcomes persons from our nearby recovery communities, such as Hope Haven and Pathways.

The Bible as Our Basic Text

Scripture passages on Sunday are not self-selected by the minister or people. Our church services have a schedule of readings from the Bible, called the lectionary, that is designed to bring the Christian Bible, and much of the Hebrew Bible, to our attention through the cycle of seasons we call the Christian year. Typically, a Sunday will include a reading from the Hebrew Bible, then a selection from the letters of the Apostles to the early communities of the Christian faith as it spread through the world, and finally a passage from one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' own life and teachings on earth. The aim is to read through the Gospels on an annual schedule.

The sermon that follows these readings is based on a reflection from the part of the Bible read that day. Episcopal ministers tend to study the Bible in a scholarly way. This doesn't bring doubt, but rather the opposite. Digging deeper into God's word, we discover how to respond to it more fully.

The Role of Fellowship and Recreation

If sin is seeking our own will over God's, then we would say that it seems to have more power when people are under stress. Human beings tend to grip the handlebars of life tightly when the pressure is on, and our own will becomes pretty persuasive then.

So part of our Christian life at St. Peter's is to enjoy fellowship and recreation. In fact, every Sunday most of us stroll next door to Spencer Hall for some coffee and kindly-prepared refreshments after church. It's a time when we can bring what we just heard into our lives and compare notes with our friends and neighbors. It is direct fellowship, and it's fun.

We are blessed with some of Harrisonville's best facilities for getting together. They range from a pretty distinguished-looking, grownup Parish house, called Spencer Hall, to an up-to-date children's playground in the yard beside it. Both settings are ideal for events and occasions.

We look for things to celebrate, and when we find them, we've got just the place.

Who is Welcome Here?

The Episcopal Church ordains men and women to the clergy, and we don't discriminate against LGBTQ persons in membership or ministry.

Chances are that somewhere in St. Peter's you'll meet somebody who's a lot like you, or who was at some point along the line. The inclusive tradition of the

Anglican Communion that forms our roots is something we're determined to keep going, especially in these times of rapid change. All are welcome.

It's not sameness that makes people feel at home here, but rather the sense that they each belong.

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