

My thoughts of transition at Redeemer

The work of transition at the Church of the Redeemer has been for many a long, tedious, and arduous task. I liken it to travelling the road to Hana on the Hawaiian island of Maui.

In November of 2025, I asked you all to stop and let me travel with you, and since that time, I have interviewed 12 members and chatted with two dozen during my visits to your worship. I was in attendance and a participant on Christmas Eve and led worship on Lent One. The Redeemer staff has been more than helpful and quick to respond to my questions. The parish governing body, Wardens, and Vestry are extremely diligent and sincere in all their decisions. The work of the parish continues, and surprisingly to many, it is still standing.

The Church of the Redeemer is small, living in a very big space that once housed a large Sunday Congregation and a Parish House that was active with vibrant programs. The old rectory is still providing a place of refuge and residence for a marginalized community.

In most of my conversations with parishioners, there has been a reference to the liturgy that is offered at Redeemer. The use of inclusive language is not unique to Redeemer because of the work done here over 30 years ago. Yes, we can all wordsmith, which I have found is a great propensity of Episcopalians. However, the fact is that the Church of the Redeemer should be proud of the work done in this area.

I shared with you all in my first sermon back in Advent the wonderful stories of an ordination, a wedding, and a child who reached for a stranger's hand to clasp when saying the prayer Jesus taught. These moments are foundational for why the members who shared these stories have remained at Redeemer.

There are the more recent members who share the stories of welcome and hospitality. For them, the people of Redeemer offer faith, hope, and love. They also point out that this is a great secret to those outside the walls of the church. Everyone I have spoken with has shared that many people come in for one or sometimes two services and then disappear. This is puzzling and a source of frustration.

One clear trait that makes me know Redeemer is an Episcopal Church is the fierce protection of tradition and custom, and slowness to make change. I relate to this as a cradle Episcopalian. The Right Reverend John Shelby Spong said we are doomed to expire if we do not accept change. All change is rooted in some tradition and custom. Change requires committed and dedicated leadership with a Captain to navigate the passage forward.

Everything I have shared with you in this report, you already know, but what you do not know is the polity of the Episcopal Church. Yes, many of you have a good understanding of the church, but not why we do certain things. For many people, the Episcopal Church offers an approachable Sacred God not wrapped up and held by a patriarchal institution. However, we have a Book of Common Prayer that is a collection of many different prayers, services, psalms, and a frequently overlooked section entitled An Outline of Faith, The Catechism. In addition to this are the Historical Documents section, which contains ancient early Christian Church pronouncements, and the summary of the first Book of Common Prayer. The Articles of Religion established in 1801 are the foundation for the Canons that govern the Episcopal Church. These documents are as important to our faith as living into the greatest commandment to Love one another.

Each generation has a unique quality that is epitomized in music or dance. There are also countless protests in each generation, some more noticeable than others, but all with a common theme, sharing God's love found in equity and the theology of liberation.

Our Episcopal Church is the home and refuge for many. The Episcopal church varies from a very high and sacred mystery of worship masked with incense, bells, and chanting to simple gatherings in homes offering morning or evening prayer. The real work of worship is found in the action of faith - not just the visible.

Action requires deep listening and flexibility to meet the needs expressed to act upon. Action happens outside the walls of the church as modeled by Jesus. He did not sit in the Temple and wait for the opportunity to assist a person in distress, to pray, or to share a parable and preach. He taught wherever he was. He did not preserve or destroy customs that were exclusionary or outdated. He followed a very simple philosophy singular to sharing God's LOVE.

For Redeemer to move forward, everyone must join to open wide the doors, clean out the excess, and make room for change. The change may look familiar, and most likely it will be familiar. I have suggested we clear out the undercroft in each building (church and parish house). This will enable us to offer valuable space for rent and activity in Morristown. It will give us a better appreciation for some treasures we have stored away in our church basement.

I believe that Redeemer is stuck in a period of little or no movement, change or growth likening it to 'Stasis.' It has been said that, to some, Redeemer is not unlike Miss Havisham (often mistakenly referred to as Mrs. Faversham), an iconic, wealthy, and eccentric spinster in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* who lives in seclusion at Satis House. She was jilted at the altar, she wears her rotting wedding dress and stops all clocks at 20 minutes to nine. She has raised her adopted daughter, Estella, to break men's hearts as revenge. I don't agree with this assessment, but what is similar is the stasis which I believe describes a congregation that is fearful and hurt.

The parishioners of the Church of the Redeemer are no different than the subjects of these three very familiar Gospels: John 4:5-42, The Woman at the Well; John 9:1-41, The blind man from birth; John 11:1-45, The death of Lazarus. Each is a story of the Gospel that requires an action of faith rooted in love. Jesus did not offer mysterious words or incantations in his ministry. These are straightforward actions of a human full of compassion as he was confronted by people in distress and fear. In each of these Gospels, the Church of the Redeemer could be the subject facing the same issues and the struggle to remain in existence.

Now is the time for action. Action will determine the type of clergy you want to guide this parish into the future. The lack of action will only perpetuate the status quo which appears to be a Chapel at Ease with no guidance other than ritual and worship. Time to plan in earnest your future by acting into faith.

The Reverend William Coffin Sloane is quoted in the following Grace; ***May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short; Grace to risk something big for something good; and Grace to remember the world is now too dangerous for anything but the truth and too small for anything but love.***

Come on now, Redeemer, let us do it!

Respectfully submitted; *Reverend Deacon Erik Soldwedel, Consultant*