

On Sunday 28th October three parishioners shared their reflections with the parish on why they give to St Thomas. Due to popular demand we are delighted to present their reflections here. Each reflection is a powerfully personal witness to God's generosity and the ways in which we grow when we respond to that generosity.

David Nyweide

Why do I give to the church? It's actually a more elementary question for someone like me in his mid-twenties: why do I even go to church? Going to church wasn't always a priority in my life. I grew up Presbyterian, reluctantly following my parents through the church doors on Sundays and rejoicing whenever they decided not to go. In high school, though, the church's strong youth ministry programs drew me to church on more than just Sundays, if not for spiritual, then for social reasons. Camps and retreats were part of the fun of church. The high school choir led the second Sunday service, and in the summer, would go on a choir tour around the country. While I believed in the story of Jesus Christ, I hadn't truly examined my faith until I was a camp counselor at junior high camp the summer preceding my first year of college. With some surprise in hindsight, the guest speaker compelled me to regularly read the Bible and question my faith to justify why I believed in being a Christian.

So I joined Bible studies in college and found the exercise of interpreting all layers of scripture riveting. To approach the Word of God with an active mind was a new concept for me but one that resonated with my philosophical leanings toward Transcendentalism. An active mind is continuously poised for renewal and spiritual replenishment, which, I intuitively believed from an early age, is especially true in nature, where we commune with what is timeless. As Emerson observed, "In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign." Although I'll always be an apologist for the Transcendentalists, they are by no means model church-goers. Emerson was forced to resign being a minister after renouncing the sanctity of the Eucharist, and Thoreau found the church and its rituals hollow. Not that I was active in church in college. I intermittently attended one near campus on Sunday mornings and tossed some change in the offering plate when it was passed, but nothing more.

But during the year after college when I was home again, I rediscovered the church. No longer was it only about youth group, but I'd grown to appreciate the church as a beautiful intergenerational community. When I came to Hanover, I sought a church community to avoid isolating myself in my own world. You, the parishioners of St. Thomas, have done more than welcome me. You're a church family who also appreciates an active mind, and you've have taught me something that had been absent from my view of the church. Despite the Gospels' attention to helping the poor and downtrodden, my perception had been that the church passively attended to those needs. Father Atkins and you the congregation taught me that the church as a collective body has the capacity to be a force of social justice, to be deliberately present in the world while providing spiritual strength for my own personal struggle of living in, but not of, the world. In essence, the church bolsters my faith while providing the structure to support my works.

But the question still stands: why do I give to the church? My graduate student stipend doesn't leave me much money after I attend to expenses, and I'm saddled with student loan debt. Surely I could show my support by just participating in the life of the church. So, why do more than plunk some change in the offering plate? I've come to understand that church is not a social club where I pay dues each time the offering plate is passed. I give fiscally beyond the offering plate because it is a sign of my partnership with and support for the ministry of this Episcopalian church family who's adopted me in this time of my life.

I stand here and say with some degree of humility that I don't tithe. In the past, I gave during the stewardship season by writing a single check for a sum greater than what I'd put in the offering plate. But this year, I'm taking a step toward the pledge card so I can give more by pacing out my giving throughout the year.

I'll close with the story of Elijah and the widow in the book of 1 Kings, which reminds me of the paradox of giving. The Lord promises to provide for Elijah by asking a widow to make a small cake from the little flour and some oil she had. The widow apparently believes Elijah and the Lord when Elijah assures her that there will be plenty of food. And there is. The bit of flour and oil are enough for Elijah, the widow, and her son to eat for many days. I'm encouraged by this passage because it gestures toward a truth: although it may seem demanding, giving still leaves enough for me and enough to continue to give to others.

Penelope Prendergast

Before I attempt to answer that question, let me confess that I still feel new to this concept. Growing up, I thought that tithing, when I ever thought about it at all, was a very time-specific idea. That time was either thousands of years ago, in the era of Bible stories, or in the Middle Ages, when peasants were bound to tithe, whether they liked it or not. In my mind, the modern church was a very rich institution. It had to be, just think of all that fantastic real estate, Westminster Abbey, Ely Cathedral, St. John the Divine ...

While I was indeed baptised an Anglican, and was sent to Sunday school in the Scottish Episcopal church, it was only when I was a college student and experienced a deep need to learn more about my faith and my church that my relationship to a specific parish became important to me. Even then, I did not really understand the communal nature of the church. My ties were very personal, to individual people only, and looking back on it, I see that the gifts were all flowing in one direction, towards me. It has been here, at St. Thomas, that I have learned, am still learning, that we are in Paul's words "the body of Christ and individually members of it". With that realization comes an incredible sense of responsibility, to become Christ in the world and to help others do the same ... because we are all in this together.

Equating the church with one's family might be trite for some people but for me it goes to the heart of the matter. In order to be part of a family and help look after my family members I need to talk to them, listen to them, pray with them. I also need to feed them, clothe them, and put a roof over their heads. In order to be a responsible family

member, I need to do my chores and pay the mortgage. In the context of our parish, I have translated this to mean that contributing to the life of St. Thomas does involve that famous trio of time, talents and money (treasure). My time and talents go towards building a sense of community, whether that be through baking for a coffee hour, serving on a committee, or being an element bearer. My dollars go towards helping pay St. Thomas' bills so that we might continue to enjoy the wonderful liturgy, the beautiful building and grounds, the music, the educational programs, the praying; and that we might continue to support the work of this parish as it ministers to its members and to the larger community. I now know that the church is not rich; we might have the real estate, but we don't have the cash flow.

In my life right now I am part of the sandwich generation: my kids are in college or about to go, and my mother is in a nursing home. The emotion connected to money in my life is panic, blind panic, as both of those places have a hefty price tag, and I am a school teacher. I grew up for a while in a single-parent household and I think anxiety about money was imprinted on me at a very early age. Unfortunately, I think we are all worried about money. Our culture is a culture of fear. We worry about the stock market, our pension funds, staph infections, the scarcity of water, the future of our children. These are all reasonable fears. It is our reaction to them that is sometimes unreasonable. Our culture has been telling us that we are in control, and some of us have believed it.

Christ asks us not to fear. He does not, however, ask us to be rash, stupid or irresponsible. We still need to pay our bills and fulfill our obligations. What he asks us to do is recognize that all gifts come from God and that God loves us and looks after us. My second confession to you is that I sometimes find that very difficult to hear, probably because of that early conditioning I told you about. But I do know it to be true, and giving thanks for all God' blessings has become an important part of my prayer life. And it is in that spirit that I give to St. Thomas. St. Thomas is also my family, my other home, and it needs my support. While whatever I give may not be enough (confession # 3, I don't yet tithe, but at least I no longer fear the idea), I give in gratitude and in hope.

New Hampshire's Canon for Stewardship, the Rev. Canon Charles La Fond, spoke to us at last year's Stewardship dinner and I have been reading something he wrote about giving to the church. He says that a parish rector is responsible "for a budget which is so infused with resources that profound ministry may occur". In turn, I think we are responsible for helping Guy lead us in that profound ministry. Guy has formed a Vision Committee that will come to the parish for guidance in examining who God is calling us to be as a parish and what He is calling us to do. Let us put our money where our vision is, so that we are ready to support God's work in a world which is so full of inequities. We are the lucky ones, and I think pledging is just a recognition of that, a desire to be open to God and his will for the whole world.

When Judith asked me to do this, I started to think about what St. Thomas means to me. St. Thomas is essential to my well-being. I am thankful to be able to share in the life of this parish, with you, and I pledge so that we might all live life, Christ's life, more abundantly and without fear.

Herb Sprouse

Judith Esmay and Father Guy have asked us to bear witness as to “Why we give to the church.” To me, witness is a statement of what we have experienced, and therefore, what we have come to believe as a result of that experience. So first, let me tell you about my experiences of giving at St. Thomas Church.

I have been a communicant at St. Thomas for nearly ten years. During this time I have worn a number of different hats as a volunteer. I have had the opportunity to work, study and pray with many, many members of our community, and I have visited those who could not come to worship with us on Sundays. In each and every one of these roles, I have received much more than I have given. I have observed at first hand the meaning of our little community of faith in the lives of her members. I have learned so much from those who are more experienced in the walk of faith than I. I have seen the face of God in the faces of dear friends, and of near strangers. This seems to point to a rule in God’s “economy” – if you will – that time, talent and treasure, freely given, return more in grace-filled gifts of the spirit than we can ever anticipate.

I vividly remember a moment, not so long ago, while cleaning up after a Second Sunday program, in which I experienced an “Epiphany.” It suddenly dawned on me how much I truly love this congregation – and how it was that this love had come to flower in this time and this place. Mind you, my love for some individual parishioners may, from time to time, be a shaky thing. But, you see, the acts of giving my time, and money, and what meager talents I have been graced with, have, in fact, changed me. In most profound ways. We often talk about the transformative effects of prayer and worship in our lives, but what I have experienced is the transformation that is brought about through giving.

There is a classic Anglican understanding of prayer, and of the meaning of the Book of Common Prayer in our life together. It is usually roughly translated from the Latin as “How we pray shapes how we believe.” I have experienced a transformation that might be expressed as “How I give shapes how I live.” My perspective on the world, my system of values, the depth of my relationship with God have all changed as a result of my giving at St. Thomas. I believe they have been transformed forever.

Now, I have to admit that I have pretty much gone off the deep end with this experience. I think that most everyone here knows that I am now in my second year of seminary, in preparation for ordination to the priesthood. I don’t want you to fear that, if you give just little bit more of your money and your time, that you, too, will then be called to ordination in the Episcopal Church. But, truly, there is no doubt in my mind that the gifts I have given to the church have been magnified and returned to me as gifts of the spirit, and that my life has been forever changed. I also believe that this transformation through giving is one of the ways that we grow together in our love of Christ and our service to the world.

So having told you of my experience, let me now tell you a little more about what I have come to believe. First, I believe that our primary purpose in life is to help advance God’s work in the world. Many, many times you have heard preachers stand in this pulpit and speak a doxology in the name of God - the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer - of all that has been, is now, and will be. I believe that we are created to participate in making this world a new place, in sustaining all that God has created and loves so

boundlessly, and ultimately, to share in pointing the way to the meaning of that creation for all to understand and act upon.

I have come to believe that, for us, this happens first in our local church community – the family of believers who receive our mail at 9 West Wheelock Street in Hanover, NH. We can wring our hands over the goings on in the Anglican Communion, we may resent the discourtesies routinely offered to our beloved Bishop Gene, we can sit in front of our television sets in stunned disbelief at natural disasters, and the horrendous results of human failings, and the forces of evil in the world. But in the final analysis, I have come to believe that it is what I do here, in my parish home, that matters first - and matters most – in assisting with God’s work. From this place that I have come to love so much, through...

- our worship together,
- through the children and adults we teach,
- through our lives of faith lived in the presence of Dartmouth College,
- through our support of our Bishop, our diocese and the Episcopal Church,
- through our assistance to the local organizations we support with our outreach gifts and volunteer efforts,
- and as we touch distant lives through our commitment to the Millennium Development Goals and the ONE Campaign,

...in all these ways we radiate the love of Christ from 9 West Wheelock Street to the far corners of the world.

And you will notice that we do this by giving. Giving of ourselves in worship and in prayer, in our return of a portion of the financial bounty God has bestowed upon us all, in our best offerings of our experiences, our abilities, our unique gifts. We do this to help God to do the next new thing, we do this to heal and nurture all of creation, and we do this to show forth the Light of Christ to a world in desperate need of meaning, and of the knowledge of the love of God.

So this is what I have come to believe, as a result of my experience of giving at St. Thomas. I pray that “May how I give, shape how I live.” And I offer that prayer for every one of us.