

ASSISTANT CURATE'S REPORT – 2020

It's hard to believe that my curacy at St. Olave's will be over in a few short months. Around the time of my ordination to the diaconate, I recall the Bishop of Toronto saying to us that he thought two years was too short for a curacy and that he would, at some point in the future, consider changing the standard length to three years. The reason, as he said, was that it usually takes a priest about two years just to get settled into a parish, and that's the point when one can really get started. While it's not in the cards for me to stay another year, I can say without reservation that I would love to if I could, and perhaps some fortunate future curate in this parish will have that honour.

Although my time at St. Olave's will draw to a close relatively soon, I am overjoyed to know that I have a twofold lifelong connection to this amazing place. Not only will St. Olave's always be the church where I was ordained to the priesthood, it is also the place where Jeff and I were married. For this, and for so many other reasons, St. Olave's will forever hold a very special place in my heart.

And if this past year and three quarters (at the time of writing) has gone by far too quickly, it has been anything but uneventful.

Most recently, of course, St. Olave's did me the great honour of allowing me and Jeff to have a pandemic-lockdown wedding here. It was simultaneously lovely to have such a small, intimate ceremony and also to be able to share it with so many people via livestream. At one point I'm told that there were 180 devices tuned into the ceremony, and while some of these were family and the friends I had already made when I arrived, a significant portion of that number was made up of the new friends Jeff and I have made in our respective parishes. I can't tell you how much it means to me to have your support in this way, not to mention the well-wishes, cards, and gifts – including the gift of flowers from the wardens and the cake from Caroline Audet. Thank you all so very much.

Of course, by the time of the wedding, we were already no strangers to livestreaming. Curates always learn a variety of new skills, but at least some of the new things I've learned over this past year were not things I was expecting, nor were they taught in seminary. I'm grateful to have been at St. Olave's in particular when all of our churches suddenly found themselves having to 'go online.' In my humble opinion, St. Olave's has handled that transition better than most. This is, of course, due to the great commitment and talent of those people involved in making our worship and educational videos, including but not limited to our editor extraordinaire, Janice Douglas, our cinematographically gifted Rector, our talented and adaptable Music Director and soloists, and our lay readers, whose contributions to the YouTube services never fail to warm my heart. I've learned more than I ever expected from all of you, and I have no doubt that the next parish I end up in will benefit from your experience, which you have so generously shared with me.

In addition to the YouTube videos, the parish bible study, autumn series, and daily office have also gone online. Collaborating with the Rector and Religious Education Chair has been both a joy and an important learning experience for me. We also added one weekly Zoom service, Tuesday evening Compline, which has been attended by a small but dedicated group. Attendance for the bible study and autumn series were better than we might have expected given the change in format. The average attendance for the autumn series was nine, while the now-concluded bible study was attended by an average of eleven people. It is worth mentioning also that both of these provided welcome opportunities for rich reflection with the attendees and were uplifting to lead.

During the course of this very strange year, in which we've had to connect primarily online or by telephone, it has become clear to me how important a source of fellowship and mutual support these small, regular Zoom meetings have been. I believe this is true of the bible study, the weekly Compline group, the Sunday Zoom coffee hours, and also the prayer reading group, which moved to meeting online at the start of the first lockdown. I'm grateful to have been able to be a part of so many of these, where I've seen firsthand your commitment to supporting one another continue to find expression even from a distance. Small groups are often a very important part of a church community, and I hope not only that the existing groups will continue to flourish but also that new ones will be formed, whether online or in person once we can return to our buildings.

Not everyone is able to connect online, however, and so the parish phone tree has also been an important source of community support. I'm especially grateful to all the callers for the important work they've been doing in the phone tree and to the Rector and Wardens who worked with me to establish it.

And, of course, mailings continue to be a source of community connection as well. The prayer card project I helped to set up with Rita Irving last year was recently revived. It had been placed on hold at the beginning of the first lockdown since we had been coordinating the cards with the weeks when we prayed for particular people at the Wednesday service of Holy Communion. With this service on hiatus, we stopped mailing out the cards. However, at Rita's suggestion, we decided to mail cards to the entire parish, letting them know that we continue to pray for all of them by (first) name at our weekday services of Morning and Evening Prayer. These prayers for the entire parish are separate from the prayers for those in special need, whom we continue to pray for by name in the biddings at our Sunday services.

Another ministry that has had to go on hiatus this year was the Community Christmas Meal. Although there was great enthusiasm in the parish to repeat this event, which was very successful in 2019, the realities of the pandemic made it too difficult to hold this year. As Christmas approached, I did convene a small group to investigate the possibilities for a parish Christmas outreach endeavour. It is true that food ministries that have been deemed to meet a critical need have been allowed by the government and diocese to continue under very tight restrictions.

Following a conversation with the group, I reached out to the diocese about this, and they agreed that we would be allowed to distribute food under these parameters. However, the restrictions, which require very careful management of how people gather and how food is prepared, would have prevented us from having anything resembling the warm, sit-down meal we hosted last Christmas or even from distributing meals in a way that we as a parish had the capacity to coordinate. In place of this meal, which I sincerely hope will be repeated in 2021, members of the parish were encouraged to participate over the Christmas season in the Hunger Patrol ministry, which has been operating according to a new and approved model.

Finally, although it feels like ages since we were able to reopen for in-person worship, I had the privilege of being a part of the re-opening effort in the fall. I learned a great deal from being able to participate in these conversations with the leadership team and from leading a tremendously dedicated team of greeters in implementing the new health screening measures and helping people acclimatise to a rather different form of gathering and worship.

This past year has largely been an exercise in learning to do things differently, but some things haven't changed. I have also benefitted tremendously from the knowledge and instruction of the Rector, who has taught me, a brand-new priest, how to celebrate and perform other priestly duties. I have also had the benefit of being allowed to take part in a great number of committee meetings, which have been good learning experiences for me at St. Olave's precisely because they function so well – and this is true whether they occur in person or on Zoom. And, of course, there is the daily learning that occurs simply through regular interaction and spiritual conversation with members of the parish. I am very grateful to all of you, and I'm confident that there isn't a better education to be had in this diocese for any new curate. Any sorrow I feel when I look ahead to the end of my curacy here is tempered by the thought that others after me will have the joy and privilege of starting out their lives in ordained ministry in this wonderful community.

Respectfully submitted by the Reverend Alexandra Stone