

AWARE OF ITS HISTORY, ST. STEPHEN'S CHURCH (ANGLICAN) BOLDLY LOOKS AHEAD.

HEATHSVILLE, VA January 5th, 2007...The roots of St. Stephen's Church are deep and strong, going back to the 1650's. It wasn't until 1881 that a church was built at its present location in Heathsville, and the congregation of St. Stephen's began to worship there. Built using the simple yet beautiful Victorian Carpenter Gothic style of architecture, it has been a treasure to the community and home to a varied and dedicated congregation ever since.

For more than ten years, the Reverend Jeffrey O. Cerar has led St. Stephen's, during which time the congregation doubled in size and a large new Parish House was built. People from several denominations have joined St. Stephen's, attracted by the Word of God that was being preached with accuracy there.

The members of St. Stephen's attribute this growth to a devotion to their mission, which is to know Jesus Christ and to make him known to others. Members are encouraged to seek an on-going progressive relationship with Jesus Christ, as God our Creator intended for us, and to tell others the good news about Jesus.

The pastor of St. Stephen's summarized that Good News as follows:

“Although every human being was made in the image of God, every person has sinned and falls short of the glory of God. By our own devices, we cannot attain the destiny for which God made us, which is to glorify Him and to be with Him forever. But God has made a way for us to be restored to that eternal destiny through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is a message for all people, no matter who they are and no matter what their circumstances. There is no other name—or way—by which people may be saved from their sin and restored to right relationship with God. This is central to the Christian message, something the vast majority of Christians worldwide believe, and something the Bible attests.”

Last month, St. Stephen's voted as a congregation to sever its ties with the Episcopal Church, which has been increasingly unwilling to affirm Jesus Christ as the only means of salvation, or that the Bible is the trustworthy and authoritative source of knowledge about God and His will. St. Stephen's has come under the leadership of other authority in the worldwide Anglican Communion, a fellowship of 38 provinces embracing 77 million people.

The decision to realign was not a precipitous one, and it was not taken in isolation. When the Episcopal Church took actions at its 2003 General Convention that were clearly contrary to Holy Scripture, the leaders of the Worldwide Anglican Communion met and admonished the Episcopal Church for their actions, and asked that certain steps be taken to rectify the matter.

In the three years following the 2003 Convention, the congregation of St. Stephen's met numerous times to discuss the issues. As a result, the congregation was at a high level of awareness and understanding of what was at stake in the Episcopal Church.

The clergy and vestry of St. Stephen's took action and kept the Rt. Rev. Peter James Lee, Bishop of the Diocese of Virginia, informed of their views. They urged Bishop Lee to lead an effort at the 2006 Convention to reverse the direction the Episcopal Church was taking. Some examples:

*January 2005: The congregation joined the Anglican Communion Network. This was a new organization within the Episcopal Church to link individuals and churches throughout the United States who share the concern about the progressive and revisionist direction the Episcopal Church was taking.

*September 2005: Twenty-two clergy from the Diocese of Virginia, representing nineteen congregations, met with Bishop Lee seeking a way forward for those churches that were unable to accept the new direction of the Episcopal Church...away from the authority of scripture.

*September 2005: The vestry summarized their concerns that the congregation would be facing a choice in the coming year if the Episcopal Church did not make a dramatic change in belief and action at the 2006 Convention. That statement, entitled "A Clear Choice", endorsed by 92% of the congregation, was sent to Bishop Lee.

*March & April 2006: The vestry contacted the Diocese of Virginia's bishops and deputies to the upcoming Convention expressing concerns over the decisions facing the Episcopal Church, and suggesting changes to the planned Resolutions.

*May 2006: More than 40 members of the congregation met in Tappahannock with Bishop Lee and the Diocese of Virginia delegates to the upcoming Convention. Several expressed concerns about the pending Convention and the disaster that they saw approaching if no positive steps were taken.

In June, 2006 when the General Convention failed to correct the controversial actions of the 2003 Convention, as the Worldwide Anglican Communion had requested, it was clear that St. Stephen's congregation, and those of other churches, had to make a choice.

In September and October of 2006 a period of forty days was set aside at St. Stephen's for the entire congregation to review the issues and seek God's guidance. This included prayer, periodic fasting and six weeks of small group discussions followed by a Rector's forum each Sunday to facilitate the process and seek answers. This culminated in congregational voting on Dec 10th and 17th, 2006.

The vote reflected that 75% of St. Stephen's congregation wanted to disassociate from the Episcopal Church yet remain aligned with the Anglican Communion through the Convocation of Anglicans in North America (CANA). In a subsequent proposal, 72% of the congregation voted for the new church to remain in its current location. With those votes, the official name of the congregation became St. Stephen's Church (Anglican). 12 other churches in the Diocese of Virginia voted to sever ties with the Episcopal Church, and two more are planning to vote this month.

CANA is led by the Rt. Rev. Martyn Minns, pastor of Truro Church in Fairfax, VA for the past 15 years. He was consecrated by the Archbishop of Nigeria, the Most Rev. Peter J. Akinola, as a missionary bishop in America for Anglican individuals and churches. Archbishop Akinola received his theological training at the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, VA.

CANA is a visionary gift from the Anglican Church of Nigeria during this time of transition. At some point in the future, Anglican congregations that are no longer in the Episcopal Church will probably become part of a Province for Anglicans in America once it is established by the Worldwide Anglican Communion.

Bishop Minns visited St. Stephen's on December 22nd, 2006 and encouraged all members to stay in this congregation and be part of the new and exciting future, with unlimited boundaries, as the new American Anglican chapter of church history unfolds.

Charlotte and Jim Hundley have been members of St. Stephen's for more than 40 years, and Jim is one of the Trustees of the church. Charlotte said, "St. Stephen's is really an ecumenical church, with a variety of denominations reflected in our congregation. Jeff Cerar has led us through this crisis with an even hand and with great patience and care for each and every one of us. He means it when he says 'all are welcome', and disassociating with the Episcopal Church and remaining Anglican is not a major change in the daily life of this church since it has always been Anglican. We are blessed to have lived to see and experience the growth and renewal at St. Stephen's and believe even better is yet to come."

Prepared by Ward LeHardy