August Priest-in-charge Annual Report: John H. Branson

Emmanuel Church, Dublin, New Hampshire

August 25, 2021

In light of the fact that worship in person and the typical community life of the congregation of Emmanuel Church, Dublin was “suspended” in the summer of 2020 due to the threat of COVID-19 infection, our “return” to “the way things used to be” has not, as yet, occurred. Yes, we have thankfully and blessedly returned to in-person worship in the beloved sanctuary of Emmanuel this summer of 2021. But we do so masked, while we maintain appropriate distance from other worshipping members, and “sort-of” exchange the Peace with nods, eye contact and so forth. At this time in our life as a congregation, we are not “at ease” in many respects, ever keeping watch and vigilant against the powers and principalities (Ephesians 6:12).

We also, in keeping with Diocesan Guidelines and advice from medical authorities, have suspended our use of wine (the Blood of Christ) in the Eucharist and only receive the Sacrament in one kind—the bread (Body of Christ). We also have suspended (in keeping with Diocesan guidelines and medical protocol) the Coffee Hour that customarily follows worship at Emmanuel.

Having to dramatically modify our liturgical life as well as the social/familial life of this congregation, every member of Emmanuel has felt the emotional, spiritual and physical challenge of this time. Since the beginning of COVID, every church in this Diocese (and other Dioceses) have had to adapt, re-frame and re-orient their life to accommodate safety protocols since our first and highest responsibility is to protect and safeguard the lives of all members of the congregation and guests. All of this change has been deeply unsettling.

Our individual and collective responses vary. Some have accommodated well, others of us, disappointed and frustrated from our customary way of worship and social activities have chaffed in these restrictions and protocols. Some of us, for our sense of safety and well-being, have “stepped back” from our usual participation in the activities and life of Emmanuel. Whereas we could worship by zoom in the summer of 2020 due to the giftedness of Gideon Pollach, Bill Raymond and others, each of us this summer of 2021 is discerning what “works” best in our respective situation.

I note that in August of 2021, church attendance has been impacted. In the Episcopal Church a metric to discern the “health” of a congregation is ASA. ASA stands for Average Sunday Attendance. ASA does not signify everything regarding the health of a congregation, but does suggest trends. August’s attendance at Emmanuel averages 25 persons, not quite a half of the number in previous years (aside from the summer of 2020 when we worshipped virtually).

This trend, I believe, is due to a variety of factors. The first is the preaching and presiding of the priests. I would suggest that nothing too radical has occurred in that regard in the past two years, (though I could be quite mistaken). There is, however, a much more complex effect that has caught up the congregation of Emmanuel—the protocols, safety requirements, tenor and tone of our wider life in this time of COVID and variants in the community and beyond. The fact that we are requiring the use of masks in worship, that Emmanuel is a small, but well ventilated space where social distancing is a bit of a challenge, that there exists in the “culture” great anxiety and stress regarding personal safety, that there has been a highly significant disruption in the past two years with what is “typical, “ normal” and the “usual” in regards to the life of Emmanuel, and that there is an overall sense of “not-knowing” the future—of how things will turn out and what life will look like a year from now, two years from now, five years from now all contribute to the “status” of Emmanuel, Dublin at the time of the Annual Meeting in August of 2021.

I do want to say that by God’s Grace and generosity, all things, all manner of things at Emmanuel will evolve and unfold wonderfully. Emmanuel has been here on this hillside for over a hundred years in times of war, tumult and depression, times of joy and abundance. God is steady and sure and will guide this congregation forward with hope and great thanksgiving.

Special thanks this year to the leadership of Ellen Avery, Senior Warden; Jack Sands, Junior Warden, Ann Conway, Secretary; and Kathy Miner, Treasurer. As members of the Management Committee much of our life at Emmanuel is given over to their collective wisdom and direction. These are the stalwart ones, the ones whose presence and faithful witness has carried us not only through these recent turbulent years, but those whose never-failing love and dedication will sustain us for the years to come. There are many other members of Emmanuel, in large and small ways who contribute significantly to the well-being and strength of this congregation. Your labors and love do not go unseen, nor underappreciated. We serve God as we can at Emmanuel. New days, COVID-free days, brighter times beckon. Together, we shall thrive.

John H. Branson

August Priest-in-charge

August 26, 2021