

**THE AFRICAN EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF ST. THOMAS
PHILADELPHIA**

A MESSAGE FROM THE RECTOR
The Very Rev. Canon Martini Shaw

THE 2021 STATE OF THE PARISH

**The AECST Express Journeys Forward Re-Imagining”
(1792 – 2021)**

Following a yearlong period of a Pandemic (COVID19) in 2020, we never imagined that we would still be in the midst of similar challenges during an entire year of 2021. However, challenges create spaces for opportunities. Again, St. Thomas Church was reminded of her historic involvement during Philadelphia’s 1792 Yellow Fever epidemic, and the critical role that Blessed Absalom Jones and the parish played, ministering in spirit and service to God’s people who were in need. This reminder challenged and presented us with novel opportunities to **Re-Imagine** how to interpret and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ today.

At the beginning of 2021, our nation announced and began mass distribution of the first vaccine to fight against COVID19. St. Thomas Church, in partnership with Lankenau Medical Center (where I am humbled to serve on the Board of Trustees), became one of the first sights in the city of Philadelphia to offer vaccinations. I became one of the first religious leaders in the city to receive the vaccination, in an attempt to reduce suspicion, anxiety and fear, especially within communities of color. As a result, St. Thomas suddenly became one of the well-known advocates for the vaccine within the city and religious communities. Along with hosting several vaccine clinics at the church, we sponsored several webinars in partnership with Lankenau Medical Center. Enormous thanks to Phyllis Cater, Patricia Garfield and the St. Thomas Health Ministry for their leadership and assistance.

Through Re-Imagining, more opportunities abound in 2021, including:

- + Worshipping and meeting virtually to keep us all connected;
- + Continuing to welcome new parishioners, while mainly worshipping virtually;
- + Celebrating both the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin L. King, Jr in January, and the Feast of Blessed Absalom Jones in February. We were very blessed to virtually receive Greetings from our Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev. Michael Curry at the Feast Day of Blessed Absalom;
- + Distributing ashes outside on Ash Wednesday;
- + Following Virtual Worship on Easter Sunday morning, distributing the Sacrament of Holy Communion at the altar;
- + Celebrating Mother’s Day, Women’s Day, Father’s Day, Graduate Sunday, and Men’s Day;
- + Continuing our Outreach efforts with Chosen 300 ministry, and distributing Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets, and financial assistance to those in need;

- + Developing our Virtual worship into a new **Re-Imagined** In-Person hybrid structure. We moved from all pre-recorded Services to Livestream and In-Person starting in September. These Livestream Services continue to nurture parishioners, friends and visitors each week both near and far. Services often include participation from the youth of our parish. Enormous thanks to our amazing, creative and dedicated Photography, Livestream and Videography ministry teams;
- + **Re-Imagining** of our Christian Formation ministry. Church School classes and weekly bible classes continued virtually. Enormous thanks to Fr. Gerald Collins and Superintendent Dorothy Archey for their leadership;
- + Welcoming our mayor again, the Honorable James Kenney, who joined us for Mass to celebrate our Annual observance of O.V. Catto Sunday;
- + Celebrating a glorious Christmas Eve Mass with the largest In-Person worship of 2021;
- + Maintaining consistent communications via Zoom to parish organizations and guilds;
- + Instituting a Monday-morning Telephone Prayer Circle for the year. Thanks to Daphne Gilstrand and Phyllis Cater for their leadership as Co-founders and directors.

To our delight, we ended another year with a sizeable budget surplus, thanks to many parishioners sharing their treasures in faithful giving.

Sadly, we mourned the death of several faithful parishioners and family members who entered the joy of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Despite another year of pandemic woes, we give thanks to Almighty God for keeping us vibrantly strong, alive and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in new and **Re-Imagined** ways and opportunities. In 2022, we shall continue to **Re-Imagine** our relationship with Christ, and our ways of loving, serving and worshipping him.

I continue to be most grateful for the dedication of: our wardens, Richard Jones and Deborah Camp Frye; Fr. Gerald Collins; a very supportive vestry; a dedicated staff; volunteers and each parishioner who loved and served our beloved church.

My hope and prayer for 2022 is that the AECST Express continues to journey forward, **Re-imagining** what God has in store for us.

I continue to be humbled and joyfully grateful to serve as your shepherd, pastor, rector and brother in Christ. As I shall continue to keep you in my prayers, please always keep me in yours as well.

May the God and the Holy Spirit direct our paths in 2022 with **Re-imagined** love, vitality, promise, service and worship.