

I will never forget five and a half years ago pouring over St. Andrew’s parish profile that was developed as part of the process to call a new rector. I remember the vibrant excitement and energy that literally steamed off the pages of that little book as I read it through over and over again discerning whether or not to put my name in as a candidate. The reading of it created such vivid mental images of both your common life and of your hopes for mission still unfolding. I knew a little of Oregon Hill – my sister Paige and friends had lived in about 4 different houses here during college in the years after, but I knew nothing of St. Andrew’s Church except what you all had captured in the profile.

Obviously there was much in it that drew me to this place, and I am repeatedly grateful for the gift of serving God together with you all here. As I think back on all those mental images, I remember one in particular that floated into my mind in dream-like fashion – fuzzy around the edges and not quite in focus – in the convergence of two expressions of hope from in disparate sections of the profile.

Under the section on the Outreach Commission, the profile read that “members are uncertain about the church’s call to serve the neighboring community and how well that mission is being carried out.” It asked “for a rector who [would] help discern the nature and scope of [the church’s] call to serve the community that surrounds us.” Then under Finance Commission, there was mention of two houses on Laurel Street owned by the church, and a desire for the new rector to help discern a vision for these properties and how they could support ministry at St. Andrew’s.

The fuzzy image that formed in my mind at the time involved the creation of a small community of young adults who would live in one of the house, as an extension of St. Andrew’s community, who would give expression to the Gospel as residents of the Oregon Hill neighborhood, and who could both help discern AND help carry out the church’s call to the neighborhood.

I didn't have much more than that, but I had been reading and hearing quite a bit about a movement called the New Monasticism, and I imagined it might be something like that. That movement, which can be traced to the mid-nineties, began as groups of young adults started moving into marginalized neighborhoods to care for the residents in intentional ways. Many developed a community rule of life that provided the rhythm for their days and was grounded in regular prayer, worship, common meals, and deliberate service to the immediate neighborhood in which they lived. It was a new expression of the ancient model of Christian monasticism that began in the early years of the Christianity Church.

When I arrived at St. Andrew's, we had just sold those houses for the very good and necessary purpose of purchasing what is now St. Andrew's House, where our offices are located and where meetings, Christian formation and various other community gatherings are held. With that, the vision receded to the back of my mind, where I assumed it would stay. But as the years passed, every once in a while someone would, in some conversation about the mission of St. Andrew's, mention something akin to the idea of a community of young adults living in Oregon Hill and connected to St. Andrew's.

The idea just kept popping up, despite the fact that St. Andrew's is a smallish church, with a respectable, but not a large number of young adults (several of whom serve on the vestry), and certainly no spare cash floating around to underwrite a major missional endeavor. Then about 18 months ago, Bishop Gulick got wind of such random musings and asked to meet to talk further about the possibility. With his help we were able to get a small grant to do a feasibility study. It was time to figure out if the Spirit might be up to something.

For much of the last year, six of us, Rock Higgins, Stephanie Higgins, Harrison Higgins, Scott Lipscomb, Sam Steinmann and myself, working with Steve Matthews

as a consultant, (and recently adding Paris Ball from the Diocese), have engaged in some rather intense discernment around the possibility of such a community on Oregon Hill associated with St. Andrew's. In October, we gave a proposal to the vestry, basically indicating that we really sensed God's work behind this and asking for approval to move from the feasibility phase to the implementation phase. The vestry gave us permission to move forward with two stipulations: 1) that the project would be budget neutral (i.e. not creating a larger deficit than the one we currently enjoy☺); and 2) that the congregation would embrace it. Well, the financing is falling into place – we're not quite there yet, but we're quite close – and so now we're here to cast the vision out more broadly with great hope and trust that that we're ready to embrace it as a parish.

For those of you scratching your heads still wondering what this is about, let me give a few more details, because this is a rather major new ministry endeavor that we are talking about here. First of all, it's name. It's called "Grace-on-the-Hill." Obviously we're drawing on Grace Arent's legacy of outreach to, care for, and love of this neighborhood, but we're also claiming and naming its mission – to give expression to God's grace in this place.

This ministry, which has the full support of and is in partnership with the Diocese of Virginia, would invite 5-6 young adults here to engage in a 10 month period of service, vocational discernment, and leadership formation. Interns would live together in a community house or houses in Oregon Hill and would follow a simple rule of life grounded in daily prayer, worship, common meals and service. They would work part-time in area non-profit organizations and churches like St. Andrew's School, Anna Julia Cooper School, William Byrd Community House, Grace and Holy Trinity Church and others, while the remainder of their time would be dedicated to caring for this neighborhood and participating in the life, mission and

ministry of St. Andrew’s Church. Neighborhood projects might include coordinating clean-up and beautification days, organizing festivals, reaching out and caring for those who are homeless or elderly, working in the community garden or farmlet, reaching out to the growing student population on Oregon Hill, and on and on. All the while, we would be offering them some space for detecting God’s movement in their own lives and what this might mean for them vocationally.

All of us who’ve been involved in the planning and the members of the vestry who have been hearing about it are excited about it for various reasons. For me, I am drawn to the potency of welcoming, channeling, and then “loosing” the “anything is possible” excitement and energy of those recent college graduates who are clamoring for ways to embody the Gospel in the entirety of their lives. I can’t help but imagine it will be enlivening and challenging and quite powerful for us as a community.

To be honest, however, I wasn’t sure how it was going to sound to others beyond St. Andrew’s, but the response has been more than supportive. This past fall, in the middle of making an enthusiastic pitch to the head of a local non-profit to not only take on one of our interns, but to help pay for it, he stopped me mid-sentence and said, “Abbott, before you go any further, can I respond?” And I thought, “Ok, here comes the ‘thanks, but no-thanks.’” Instead he slapped his hands on the table and said, “I love this idea!” While not all the reactions have been that enthusiastic, most all have been hugely encouraging. And in the last few weeks, as whispers of this have begun trickling through the Diocese, I’ve received three emails from college seniors basically asking for an application to “the proposed internship program that you all are working and may start in 2013.” All I can say is, “Folks, this thing is real!” You and I may not have envisioned the content of this profile as a prayer six years ago, but I think God did.

You see, there is always something particular about the Gospel. Jesus was born in a particular place at a particular time to a particular people. During Epiphany we celebrate the universality of that particularity – the Good News of God in Christ meant for all people in all times in all places. Yet one truth of the incarnation remains – the universal love of God, the universal redemption of Jesus, the universal movement of the Spirit, is always manifest in particular ways through particular people, in particular places and particular times.

While it is true that St. Andrew's has become and will likely remain a destination church – one comprised not primarily of people who live within walking distance, but one comprised of people from all over the metro Richmond area. It is also true that, in keeping with our genesis, some aspect of our mission will likely always – though not exclusively – be quite local. Last week I suggested that God had gathered us all here in this place and time for a reason, and in keeping with the particularity of the Gospel, I can't help but believe that some of our being gathered together from the far reaches of Richmond has to do with this particular place we know of as Oregon Hill and its immediate surrounding area. In this community of faith our lives are touched and changed and renewed and blessed, so that we can help God touch and change and renew and bless lives throughout our days not only as individuals but also right outside our doors through our common mission and outreach. This is the hope of Grace-on-the-Hill. That it will be a blessing to the interns, a blessing to the non-profits in which they work, a blessing to the neighborhood, a blessing to us, and a blessing to God right here, right now.

So here's where we are. Basically, we're asking the congregation to embrace the idea of engaging in a ministry of encouragement with these young adult interns. In many ways, this would simply be another way to give expression to that charism of love and welcome inherent at St. Andrew's that I mentioned last week. We do this

naturally and with ease. But we also imagine this ministry of encouragement manifesting in tangible ways. For some, it might be attending weekday services of the daily office or community meals with some regularity, for others it might be through mentoring an intern or showing them around Richmond, and for others it might mean volunteering for some of their neighborhood projects or facilitating a book study. For others it might be through sharing your own skills and hobbies, like cooking, canning, beer brewing, birding, biking, carpentry knitting, quilting, painting, drawing. The possibilities are many.

After the service, Rock, Stephanie, Harrison, Sam, Steve and I will be available over at St. Andrew's House for coffee to answer any questions and to hear your thoughts. In each of the bulletins, you'll find a small card meant to help us begin to capture some of the ways you all might like to be part of this ministry. We are hopeful – really hopeful – for all the ways this community might embrace the potential of Grace-on-the-Hill as a continuation of the legacy of Grace Arents and as a manifestation of God's continual outpouring of grace. As I said a moment ago, you and I may never have envisioned the content of this profile as a prayer six years ago, but I think God did. I wonder what else is in here [the profile]!