

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This year, I am going to use the sermon time to deliver my annual meeting rector's address. When we get to the annual meeting, I'll invite you to engage with some of the questions from this sermon.

First, I want to thank you for the privilege of being your rector. It is an honor and a privilege to journey with you through the joys, celebrations, and heartaches of life.

Second, I want to thank the staff for all their hard work over the last year. We have a small and dedicated staff who continue to serve God through serving at St. Thomas Church. Thank you. It is a privilege to serve alongside you.

And last, I want to thank you for partnering with the staff and me in ministry. St. Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth... For we are God's coworkers, working together; you are God's field, God's building."¹ Thank you for partnering with the staff and me in ministry. We have grown, and it is because of your labors and God's help!

I am grateful for this opportunity to celebrate all that we have accomplished for God's glory at this year's annual meeting.

For this annual meeting, I want us to picture a crocus in the snow. That is how I see St. Thomas Church: growing in the wintertime of the church.

St. Thomas is experiencing growth. This growth is a continuation of the past several years. A crocus is a picture of growth, but it is also exposed.

As a historically well-resourced church, we were among the first parishes in our diocese to emerge from the winter, the pandemic, and larger national and global trends in church attendance, and we have shown signs of growth. Our church has shown great resilience and perseverance.

And to give you a sense of the growth I am talking about, I'd like to share some stats from the year. Last year:

1. We grew in numbers.

- a. Average Sunday Attendance increased by 4%.
- b. Easter Vigil attendance grew by 40%.
- c. Easter Day attendance grew by 11%.
- d. Christmas Eve attendance grew by 9%.

¹ 1 Corinthians 3:6-9.

2. **We grew in our children and youth ministry**, welcoming six new families with children into the life of the parish since September.
3. **Sixteen people were confirmed**, including 10 youth and 6 adults.
4. **Our music ministry flourished**, with a strong concert series offered by the music guild, a choir and chorister trip to England with over 90 people attending, and the launch of the St. Thomas Church Music Academy.
5. **We strengthened our financial health**. While challenges remain, we met a pledging stretch goal, received many generous gifts toward the Rector Housing Campaign (including a land gift), secured a significant naming-rights gift, and worked on revenue generation compliance work.
6. **We invested in our buildings and grounds**, including completing the stained-glass windows and major upgrades to our sound system.

And there is more. I commend the updated Strategic Action Plan to you for more examples of growth. I share these metrics not to boast, but as part of the narrative of transformation happening at St. Thomas.

I'd like to pause and offer thanks to God and to you for this growth.

As a crocus in the snow, there is a sense of faith and momentum. There is a sense that if we can root down and persevere while the earth thaws, that, in the long term, we will thrive and even flourish in the springtime of the church.

And as a crocus in the snow, we have been able to embrace doing and being church in new ways. As our ability to pay staff has decreased, we have increased volunteer participation and involvement. And now that we are hitting capacity, we have begun to discern what sustainable ministry looks like moving forward.

It is also true that, as a crocus in the snow, we are exposed.

We are growing during the wintertime of the church. We are exposed to winter weather, which makes us vulnerable. It is not spring yet. We know winter is just a season, and we don't know how long this one will last.

And today, our vulnerability stems from our budget deficit.

During my first month as your Rector, we discovered the extent of our budget deficit. And while we have worked hard to reduce it and made good progress in strengthening our financial health, it is part of the wintry mix that has colored the backdrop of our common life since the day that I arrived.

As an early winter bloom, we straddle these two truths that are in tension with one another.

We are growing despite all odds. We are bucking the trends of church decline.

And we have a budget deficit that we can no longer sustain in the short-term. We will hear more about this at the annual meeting from our Senior Warden and Treasurer's Report.

And there is a place where these two truths, these two narratives, come together. And one of those points of connection is: it takes money to grow a church.

I wonder if these two truths are ringing true for you?

When we get to the annual meeting, I'll invite you to reflect on how this image and these two truths resonate with you.

Doing this type of exercise is part of what business professionals call "strategic foresight."² In business speak, strategic foresight is turning uncertainty into a competitive advantage. Finding the upside of these two truths.

In an article from Harvard Business Review, entitled "Managing Uncertainty: What Companies that Excel at Strategic Foresight Do Differently," Wendi Backler talks about strategic foresight and how it can help companies. In the life of the church, I would describe this concept as a strategy for turning uncertainty into a missional and spiritual opportunity to grow and become the people God is calling us to be. It is the disciplined practice of faithfully discerning how to respond to present realities, while keeping an eye on the future God is calling us toward.

In this article, Wendi Backler describes how foresight leaders can address the challenge of spanning two-time frames in an organization's life. Backler writes: "Foresight leaders overcome the pressures of short-termism by running foresight at two speeds in parallel: sensing foresight for real-time decisions and shaping foresight for long-term bets."

In other words, foresight leaders resist being driven solely by the threat of the moment and instead seek possibilities and faithfulness amid uncertainty.

Backler discusses the types of organizational attitudes needed to turn uncertainty into a competitive advantage. She does this by asking these questions: "Are you continually stuck in a cycle of short-term reaction to perceived threat of the moment, or are you able to focus on hunting for upside amid uncertainty? Is intuition taking a front seat to quantitative approaches?"

At St. Thomas, foresight leadership has meant this: We have held our budget realities alongside prayerful discernment in investing in church growth. We have looked honestly at our finances

² <https://hbr.org/2026/01/what-companies-that-excel-at-strategic-foresight-do-differently>

while also listening deeply for where the Spirit is leading us. We have developed and worked on a strategic action plan that addresses both the short-term and long-term tracks.

For us, foresight leadership has not been about predicting the future or controlling outcomes. It has been about paying attention—to God, to one another, and to the realities before us—so that we can make faithful decisions in this moment while preparing for the church God is calling us to become tomorrow.

When I sat with our leadership (the Vestry and Executive Committee), I invited us to reflect on the upside of our uncertainty, or in spiritual talk, the spiritual opportunity of being a crocus in the snow.

A few of those reflections included:

- In a financially well-resourced community, the church has been invited to have more faith in God with our finances.
- We have tried to increase our financial transparency.
- We have re-examined our “why” and doubled down on our mission.
- We have increased our interdependence on all church members in new ways, relying on everyone’s time, talent, and treasure.
- We have continued to turn outward to our community and invited them into the life of the church. Which will be our focus next year, “branching out to serve”.
- We have tried to live into the ELC’s vision to be a resource for the community while also generating revenue, which required us to do compliance work to make this vision possible.
- We have reinvigorated and strengthened our relationship with St. Thomas School.
- We have come to terms with our human limitations about what this body of Christ can do today.

I’m sure there are more we will hear in the annual meeting.

We are a crocus in the snow. We are growing. With God’s and your help, we will weather this storm and continue to thrive in the springtime of the church.

As we celebrate the past year, and look to the coming year, let us continue to strive for God’s kingdom right where we are. Let us remember what God requires of us and make it our mandate to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly before our God. Let us remember the invitation of the beatitudes that describes the kingdom of God that looks different from the icons of power and is found in the poor, the vulnerable, and in the people we’d least expect.

And finally, let us remember what Jesus said about flowers – the lilies.³ Let us remember God’s promise to care for the lilies and to strive for not the things of this world, but for the kingdom of God. **Amen.**

³ ²⁷ Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ²⁸ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! ²⁹ And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ³⁰ For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹ Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.