

WEATHERING THE STORM Together

Beloved Community

▶ With God's creation as the backdrop, the Rev. Beth Hixon celebrates the Eucharist in Church of the Epiphany's new worship home in the Warner Education Building.

A fierce winter storm in February 2018 brought heavy, wet snow and blustery winds during the night, causing a large tree on the property of Church of the Epiphany in Royersford to unexpectedly snap. It fell across Third Avenue, blocking the road. The borough and PECO came out soon after and cleared the road, moving the imposing tree trunk back onto church property. There it remained through the rest of winter and into spring, when a group of church members banded together to chop it up, giving chunks of wood to any neighbors who wanted them and feeding the remnants into a wood chipper.

With all that has transpired since, the fallen tree has taken on a deeper, more symbolic meaning for Ed Hill, the vestry's property liaison and a former teacher at Kimberton Waldorf School.

"It's almost as though that tree was an omen, a forewarning," Hill says. "It was a wakeup call."

Within eight months, the beautiful stone church itself—built in 1903, after the original 1889 structure was destroyed by fire—was shuttered and closed. Everything inside, from the pews to the ornate carved oak screening around the pipe organ and sacristy, had been sold and hauled away.

In late spring, not long after the tree fell, the building had been deemed "distressed" by a structural engineer. There were cracks in the mortar and the stone, and the walls were separating from the woodwork—a slow, inexorable process that had been going on for decades.

At one particular spot, the engineer who examined the building found that the wall was a full 6 inches out of plumb, referring to how far it was from being vertical, the Rev. Beth Hixon recalls.

"It was a structural problem from the beginning because they built this church straight into the dirt. There was no real foundation," says Hixon, who came to Epiphany as priest-in-charge in 2014, and was called as rector two years later.

But while cracks were showing in the stones and mortar of the church building, members of the vestry and congregation held together. And while the building may have lacked a real foundation, the people who worshipped there had an unshakeable foundation of faith in God and love for one another.

"There is a tremendous amount of commitment to their life together," Hixon says of the congregation.

That life continues today, just a short walk from the vacant, boarded-up church building.

The final service inside the church was held on Michaelmas, the feast day of St. Michael and All Angels, which fell on Saturday, Sept. 29, 2018. The next morning, on Sunday, Sept. 30, the congregation gathered to worship in a large, rectangular meeting room in the parish's Warner Education Building, built in the early 1960s and still linked to the church by a covered walkway.

There is no stained glass in the room where worship was held that day—and every Sunday since. But there are large picture windows that serve as a backdrop to the altar, offering a peaceful view of God's creation—tranquil trees and gently sloping grass.

Since arriving at Epiphany, Hixon has emphasized that the church is the "beloved community," not a building. "That's a mantra that I weave through everything," she says. ▶



During their "Souper Bowl Sunday," the church worships and then fellowships together over homemade soups brought in by members of the congregation. This year, several members wore Philadelphia Eagles garb.

→ Following that first service in the new space, Hixon recalls, the most poignant thing she heard was the comment from parishioners: “We’re still us.”

“It was a realization that we’ve got the liturgy, we’ve got each other,” Hixon says. “That’s where the Spirit is with us.”

That realization can be seen in the message that is now printed on all of the church’s materials: “The Church of the Epiphany Worships in the Warner Education Building.”

The church remains, only the location has changed.

At the same time, there was a recognition that members needed to grieve for the loss of the sacred space where many had

worshipped for so much of their lives. “The whole grieving process continues,” Hixon says. “And yet there’s a lot of joy in the newness as well.”

About 40 members continue to worship in the Warner Education Building space each Sunday morning, while working through a difficult discernment process that will determine whether they stay there or look to relocate elsewhere.

“Underlying the transition for all of us has been, what’s next? Where are we going? What are we being asked to do in this community? And we don’t know,” Hill says. “But that’s something we’re praying about, and asking God, ‘May we hear what you want us to do.’ We’re looking for that.”

What’s Old, What’s New?

Over the decades, the Church of the Epiphany has persevered through fire—the 1903 blaze that razed the original church building; the threat of closing—in 1926, as maintaining adequate membership to support even a shared vicar became a struggle that led members to consider closing the doors; and tragedy—the death of their beloved priest, the Rev. Dennis H. Warner, who joined the church as its very first rector in 1973 after Epiphany finally received parish status following decades of being served by resident vicars. A cherished member of the church family, Warner succumbed to brain cancer in 2007, just one year after the disease was diagnosed.

Although the church was served by an interim priest and two other priests in the intervening years, Hixon found members were still struggling with their grief and loss when she was called as priest-in-charge in 2014.

“When I first came, what struck me as the theme was: what’s old and what’s new,” Hixon recalls. “I was new. We really kind of focused on that—what’s old, what’s new—so we could have conversations that would help people grieve. I still felt the grief from a number of other transitions, and I knew we would go nowhere unless we did that work. And people were really on board with it.”

While the members of the church are mainly older, several young families have joined in recent years, attracted by what Hixon calls “the open, loving, embracing way of the people of the Church of the Epiphany”.

“If Epiphany is going to grow and flourish, we’re going to have to tap into whatever passion the young people here have for church,” she says.

The question of what’s next became all too real as the vestry, and then the congregation, came to understand the dire condition of their church home. In January 2018, before the tree fell and before they knew how extensive the issues with the church were, Hixon asked Hill if he would be willing to serve on vestry, and take on the important role of property liaison.

“I had no idea what that was going to mean,” Hill says, wryly.

Once the full extent of the problem became clear, the church—like so many others in the Diocese of Pennsylvania and throughout the Episcopal Church in the United States—lacked the resources to restore the building. Just as previous generations of vestries had lacked the resources to make necessary repairs as they continued to mount, settling instead to do the best they could with what they had in patchwork fashion.

The estimated costs to shore up the structure started at \$200,000, and rose to a million dollars and beyond. And even if the church had that kind of money, there was no guarantee it would solve the problem.

The difficult decision to leave the church building was made in May 2018. The engineer had recommended that people should be out of the building before the first

frost. So the vestry set a Nov. 1 deadline to close the building and begin worshipping elsewhere.

Diocesan staff provided support and guidance throughout the transition. The Rev. Canon Kirk Berlenbach, canon for growth and support, met with vestry several times, and led a vestry retreat. He preached during a service one Sunday in the months before the move, and attended the last service in the old church building representing the diocese. Property Manager Sean McCauley also came to the church, and helped vestry members understand the process of selling the property.

“The diocese has been supportive when and how we’ve needed them to be,” Hixon says.

During the months leading up to the move, Hill recalls, teams were formed, lists were compiled, and duties were assigned and carried out. After exploring other possible locations, the decision was made to move worship services to the Warner Education Building, which houses a nursery school in the basement, and parish administrative offices, space for Sunday school, and the meeting room on the first floor.

“All of these things went on, and it was because of Beth,” Hill says. “She was guiding this. She had this plan that was working for us and working with us and strengthening us in the whole thing that allowed us to come through this in the way we apparently have.”

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REV. BETH HIXON



What's Next?

Having successfully made the transition to a new worship space, the members of the Church of the Epiphany are now working to discern the answer to a question that should be in the prayers and deliberations of all congregations: What's next?

“This is taking a tremendous amount of energy. That’s a reality and the truth,” Hixon says. “You can put one foot in front of the other, which is what we’ve been doing, but even that takes an awful lot of energy—to be in constant discernment and try to discern how the Spirit is leading and what’s next. Do we stay here? Do we get comfortable or not? What are the pros and cons?”

Discernment involves matters temporal as well as spiritual. Parking, for example, is a concern. Most church members do not live within walking distance of the church, which only has on-street parking available.

“That’s a growth issue,” Hixon says. “Remaining on this property, how would we grow? Because people like parking. There are a lot of little issues like that to look at. But I think the overriding consideration is the love people have for one another, the family of relationships.”

Through the storms that have battered the church, literally as well as figuratively, Hixon credits the vestry with providing wisdom, strength, and support.

“There’s no way that we would be as healthy as we are if we didn’t have some pretty incredible people here who bring their love and their commitment and their gifts to bear,” Hixon says.

She recalls how, at the diocesan clergy conference she attended last year, Bishop Daniel led an Ignatian contemplative exercise

based on the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Participants were asked to envision themselves in the well-known scene recounted in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in which Jesus is in a boat with his disciples when a storm comes upon them. The disciples fear for their lives and panic, rousing Jesus from his sleep. Rebuking the disciples for their lack of faith, Jesus calms the raging winds and waves.

“One of the questions was, who was in the boat with you?” Hixon recalls. “I was aware that when I looked around the boat, it was all of our vestry members. All of them were in the boat with me, and we were weathering the storm together.” ■