

✠ ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Beyond The
Red Door



CULPEPER AND CATLETT, PARTNERS IN CHRIST

By E. Ray Walker

Dearly beloved: We are delighted to announce an exciting new partnership between St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Culpeper and St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Catlett. Let's all sing, rejoice and celebrate.

Under the agreement, both churches will collaborate in hiring a curate to serve as "priest-in-charge" in Catlett and as "assistant priest" in Culpeper.

In Catlett, the new priest will have all canonical responsibilities of a priest-in-charge; lead worship and preach at two Sunday services; collaborate with parishioners in community evangelism; and take the church to the people.

In Culpeper, the new clergy will assist Rector Trent Moore in regular priestly duties.

Catlett is a small community (population: 290) in eastern Fauquier County, just off U.S. 28, midway between Bealeton and Manassas. It's about an hour's drive from Culpeper.

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

The Very Rev. Trent Moore explains:

One of the deepest convictions I hold about St. Stephen's, Culpeper is that our mission and vision have much to offer beyond our own walls — to our town, our county, and the wider Episcopal Diocese

of Virginia. I believe our greatest strength often comes into play through collaborative partnerships and the meaningful friendships formed at regional gatherings.

It was at these gatherings that I first connected with the wonderful people of St. Stephen's, Catlett. Since the Rev. Pete Gustin's retirement, they had been praying fervently for a new priest. Despite several strategic attempts to find a path forward, their search had proven difficult, and some were beginning to feel discouraged.



At the same time, I was personally praying through new projects I hoped to launch in Culpeper. I kept thinking how beneficial it would be to have a second clergy member to assist, yet I knew our finances couldn't support an additional position.

Then, a "holy spark" ignited: They needed a priest, and I could use a partner.

I began to explore this "crazy" idea with a few trusted colleagues, expecting them to point out why it wouldn't work. To my surprise, they met the vision with overwhelming support. When I shared the idea with then-wardens Kim Helsel and Billy Green, they immediately embraced the possibility, asking simply, "How can we make this happen?"

The path became even clearer during a lunch with visiting Bishop Ted Gulick. As I presented the idea, he shared a beautiful connection: St. Stephen's, Catlett was his childhood church, the place where he first served as an organist. With his blessing and several offers of assistance, it was clear that God was doing something new.

From there, I reached out to the Rev. Canon Will Dickinson, the diocesan transition officer, to begin dreaming and planning in earnest. This led to a productive meeting with members of the Catlett Vestry and Discernment Committee, and as they say, the rest is history.



WITNESSING GOD'S MISSION

The Rev. Dickinson, at the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia, worked with both churches on the partnership. "It's all about witnessing to God's mission in the world in brave new ways. This is such an exciting way of serving multiple needs in a new way."

Looking ahead, Dickinson said, "The (new) priest will get to know both congregations, assisting Trent as the pastoral demands of Culpeper's fast-growing church rise, while helping St. Stephen's, Catlett as their priest to invest in their community and grow."

(The Rev. Canon Will Dickinson)

Both churches will split the expense of the new priest, with Culpeper's share coming from its Legacy Fund.

"This position isn't just about 'sharing a priest.' It's about two churches working together to witness to a whole geographic area in a new and intentional way," Dickinson said. "St. Stephen's, Culpeper has a long history of working with other churches so that both can grow. This is a new way of doing just that."

Going forward, Dickinson said, “A joint committee of representatives from both churches and the rector of St. Stephen’s, Culpeper will receive applications, conduct interviews, and make a joint decision. It’s important that each church feel confidence in the process and ownership over the decision.”

There is an April deadline for applications, but Dickinson adds, “However, everyone involved agrees that we should wait to find the *right* priest, not just the first available priest!”

Priest-sharing in the Episcopal Church is not unusual. “Sharing a priest between two (or more churches) is *very* common in the Episcopal Church, especially as more and more churches cannot support a full-time priest on their own,” Dickinson said.

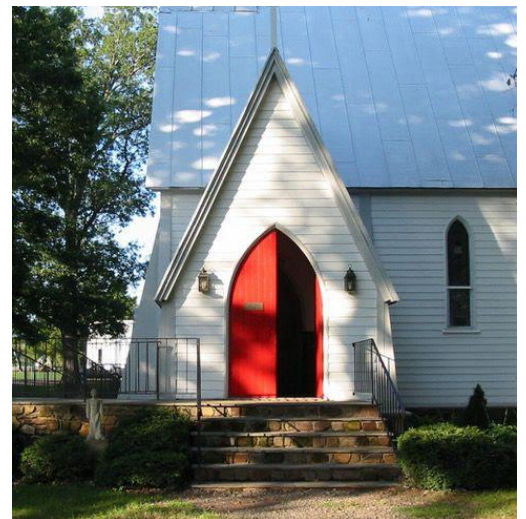
“However, *this* position in Culpeper/Catlett comes from a place of abundance, not scarcity. Both churches see the potential for growth in the area and envision that Catlett would eventually grow into a full-time position.

“This is also an especially appealing position for a newly ordained priest, because they would receive mentorship from an experienced priest (Trent), learn from both churches, and have the opportunity to cut their teeth as the priest-in-charge in Catlett.

(Joanne Faunce, the senior warden at Catlett, raves: “Trent is an ideal mentor.”)

Dickinson’s vision of the Culpeper-Catlett accord differs from the common perception of priest sharing. “The difference is that *this* position is about more than just two churches in need of the service of a priest. Instead, it’s about two churches that have developed a forward-thinking, creative way to witness to God’s people in a team-based approach.”

Joanne, the Catlett senior warden, says the Vestry and congregation there are “very happy” with this agreement. “We used to be a very vibrant church,” but problems over the years have hurt. Still, Catlett retains a vibrant preschool program, she says.



The Catlett Vestry had worked with the diocese to address the church’s problems, but solutions were elusive. Enter Father Trent from Culpeper.

“When Trent called to suggest a partnership, it was like a light at the end of a tunnel,” Joanne said. Goodbye despair, hello hope. Praise be to God.

Kim Helsel, who was senior warden in Culpeper at the time of its agreement with Catlett, is enthusiastic about the covenant between the churches. “The decision to utilize the Legacy Fund to support this mission reflects the Vestry’s forward-thinking leadership, as it has thoughtfully addressed several important concerns and issues.”

Partnerships such as this are not new to Episcopal churches. Most shared positions involve a single priest serving multiple churches, but this Culpeper/Catlett collaboration involves a team serving a geographical area. A similar collaboration is now in place in Goochland, Va., between St. John’s and

Grace, and one is being developed on the Northern Neck between St. Mary's in Fleeton and Wicomico Parish.

"Teams of ministers mean more sustainable ministry and more capacity to witness to Jesus. This is the future of ministry in the Episcopal Church," Dickinson said.

So, there you have it — a faith miracle in the Piedmont. Sing! Rejoice! Celebrate! ... And pray!