

Beyond ^{The} Red Door



A HELPING HAND FOR THOSE IN NEED

By E. Ray Walker

“Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done..” — Proverbs 19:17 (NIV)

Life isn't always rainbows and bunnies. Bad things happen. Sometimes, very bad things. And when those things happen, they can be devastating to individuals and families. With financial resources exhausted and hope rapidly running out, those people suddenly find themselves in need of a temporary helping hand.

Which brings us to the St. Stephen's Rector's Discretionary Fund.

The Fund is intended to alleviate the basic needs of people in the Culpeper area. For example, last year St. Stephen's helped people in genuine need with temporary shelter, food, utilities, transportation, medical costs, rent, housing, clothing and more. In other words, sharing what God has given, with glad and generous hearts.

According to the Canons of the Church (rules of the church), these funds are to be used for “such pious and charitable uses as the Rector or Priest-in-Charge shall determine.”

The idea of such a fund goes back to the first millennium, making possible the alms (money, food or other donations) to the less fortunate. The Fund allows the priest to provide that help confidentially and at the priest's discretion.

How do people in need wind up at St. Stephen's? According to our rector, the Rev. Trent Moore, "We have walk-ins or phone calls nearly every week asking to speak to the pastor. The time it takes to vet the validity of each instance is actually quite time-consuming. We've had referrals from social services, Encompass Community Supports, People's Inc., Aging Together, Culpeper Housing & Shelter Services, the police, the hospital, and other local churches. Sometimes we will partner with some of these agencies and other churches when a situation becomes dire and too expensive for one agency."



Fr. Trent adds: "Sometimes, Faith Dickerson (Food Closet director) or a Food Closet volunteer will have the chance to ask a client how things are going. A handful of times, stories of need are shared and the person in the Food Closet will ask if they want to go see the pastor, he might be able to help."

When someone comes in, Fr. Trent says his first question is typically, "Are you hanging in there?" Followed by, 'Would you like some water or coffee,' then sit down and tell me your story."

It's rare, but occasionally a sticky family matter is involved. How does Fr. Trent handle those instances?

"Coming up on two years of being here, so far I've only had to deal with a few of these types of situations. In the majority of cases when such things occur, safety and need are paramount. This is also when to exercise strong boundaries and knowing what I can and can't do is very important. When I find myself unable to do something, this is when having a network of other people and agencies to refer to is vital."

To be trusted, confidentiality and the anonymity of individuals are crucial. "To honor our baptismal promises to honor and respect the dignity of every human being, anonymity and confidentiality are paramount," Fr. Trent said.

"I get the incredible privilege of seeing how those resources change lives on a weekly basis," the rector said. In 2023, "We helped 47 individuals or families with the Discretionary Fund. So far in 2024 (to mid-July), we have helped 37 times."

For those 37 individuals, where despair had taken root, the St. Stephen's Rector's Discretionary Fund provided a glimmer of hope. A helping hand.

HOW IS THE FUND FUNDED?

The money for the discretionary fund does not come from the church's annual budget. Instead, a significant part of it is provided by an old, unique church tradition that designates the 'loose offering'

of one Sunday a month as alms and offerings for the poor. Those funds are set aside to be distributed by the clergy at their discretion.

In addition, parishioners can give directly to the Fund by check at any time. Simply write “discretionary” in the memo line.

The rector maintains scrupulous documents detailing the records of who, what, and how many times the Fund has helped people. However, none of that detail is shared with the auditor. What is shared with the auditor is the financial accounting paper trail.

The Discretionary Funds are maintained in the church’s bank account. However, the Discretionary Fund is separate from the operating budget and other funds.

The rector, bookkeeper and treasurer monitor the Fund’s checking account.

THE RECTOR’S FUND AT A GLANCE

Some facts about the Rector’s Discretionary Fund:

—The Fund belongs to St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, not the rector.

—The Fund is intended to help anyone in need.

—The Fund is also known as “Clergy Discretionary Fund,” meaning deacons (when available) can use the money for people in need.

—The Fund cannot be used to pay other church expenses.

—The Fund is audited annually.