

✠ ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Beyond The *Red* Door



REV. JOHN, WE HARDLY KNOW YE

By E. Ray Walker

Miracles happen. What was a dream in March is now a reality.

St. Stephen's in Culpeper and St. Stephen's in Catlett are delighted to announce they have hired a shared priest. The Rev. John E. Hager has been chosen as the priest-in-charge in Catlett and as assistant priest in Culpeper (together known as "curate").

In Catlett, the Rev. Hager 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, he will assist the Very Rev. Trent Moore in regular priestly duties.



Rev. John Hager

The Rev. Hager started his new responsibilities on July 1. His salary and expenses will be paid equally by both churches.

“Almighty and everlasting God, from whom cometh every good and perfect gift: Send down upon our bishops, deacons, and priests, and upon the congregations committed to their charge, the healthful Spirit of thy grace; and, that they may truly please thee, pour upon them the continual dew of thy blessing. Grant this, O Lord, for the honor of our Advocate and Mediator, Jesus Christ. Amen”
— Book of Common Prayer



Rev. John Hager with Bishop Harris

Moore, the rector at SSEC-Culpeper, is enthusiastic about Rev. Hager coming aboard. In a message to parishioners announcing Hager's hiring, Moore said, "This shared clergy position represents a wonderful bridge and strategic outreach initiative between our two historic communities. As Assistant Priest here in Culpeper and Priest-in-Charge at Catlett, John will divide his time to provide vibrant pastoral care, liturgical leadership and fresh energy to both congregations. I look forward to working closely alongside him as we enrich our existing pastoral and outreach ministries and worship life together."

Joanne Faunce, the Senior Warden at SSEC-Catlett, says her church is excited about Rev. Hager's arrival and the working relationship with Culpeper. "We have been without a priest for over two years and were getting very frustrated. It seemed everything we tried came to a dead end. Then along came St. Stephen's Culpeper and Father Trent. We feel so blessed! We are small in number but big of heart. Our prayer is that this will be the stepping stone to growing our church and reaching out to the needs of our community."

So, who is this new priest who will be splitting his work hours between Culpeper and Catlett?

Allow the Rev. Hager to introduce himself, but first, how should we refer to him?

"You are welcome to call me Fr. John — which will tide you over to when I am ordained priest — or, until September, you may also call me Deacon John."

And his background?

"I grew up in Southwest Virginia and more recently in King George County, with a brief intermittent few years in Arkansas. I spent four years in Edinburgh, Scotland, at Edinburgh University for my undergraduate degree. My years in Scotland in the Scottish Episcopal Church were formative for my sense of priestly vocation."

Thereafter, I worked for a year in Philadelphia at St. James School, a tuition-free Episcopal school. From there, I spent three years at Yale Divinity School, from which I graduated in May of this year. I was ordained deacon in March and, God willing, will be priested in September."

The Rev. Deacon Mr. Hager was kind to answer some personal questions.

(Pictured right, a sketch of St. Stephen's Culpeper by Rev. John Hager)



Question: What are the attractions of Culpeper and Catlett to you?

Hager: The partnership between these two parishes is exciting. It embodies and demonstrates trust in the call to cooperation, mutual support, and hope in the church's future, which is our life in the Risen Lord Jesus.

I am delighted with the devotion of the folks I have met at St. Stephen's, Catlett, and with the thriving preschool there. I am likewise energized by the strong sense of community and welcome at St. Stephen's, Culpeper, and the vitality of the Food Closet. Both are beautiful and historic buildings and campuses that strike me as offering a sacramental haven to their respective communities.

Q: Do you have a favorite scripture passage, and why does it resonate with you?

Hager: In St. Luke's Gospel alone, we find the story of the so-called "repentant thief" (whom tradition later gave the name "Dysmas"): "And (Dysmas) said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Lk. 23.42-43)

This moment is frequently recounted in the Stations of the Cross at Jesus' Crucifixion; particularly when I hear it, then I can't help but be extremely moved. The remarkable point for us people of faith is that the thief's seemingly simple confession of Jesus' divinity assures him of paradise. There is an astonishing intimacy in the thief's request that Jesus remember him — that Jesus, that God, should recall him — with whom God suffers! — in the heavenly places. It is a story of immense hope emerging in a moment of gruesome pain, showing forth the extraordinary nature of God, who draws all people to God's future regardless of one's past or present.

It reminds me of a poignant line from a hymn: "And when human hearts are breaking under sorrow's iron rod, then they find that selfsame aching deep within the heart of God." ("God is Love, Let Heaven Adore Him.")

Q: What is your absolute favorite church hymn?

Hager: For someone who is constantly playing and quoting hymns, that is a tough question!

However, I always find myself returning to 'Ye Holy Angels Bright'—see no. 625 in the *Hymnal* 1982. There's something about the edifying text (by John Baxter) joined with a bright and noble tune



*Sketch of St. Stephen's Catlett
by Rev. John Hager*

(*Darwall's 148th*) that communicates perfectly the meeting of the earthly and heavenly choruses of which the hymn sings. I particularly enjoy a recording from St. Paul's Cathedral, London, on [YouTube](#).

Q: How do you relax and unwind on your day off?

Hager: I am an avid artist — I love to sketch and paint. I am also an organist and pianist, so I can frequently be found playing hymns or fumbling through classical repertoire. I go to the gym daily, and also enjoy hikes through the beautiful Virginia countryside.

My fiancé and I also love to visit local historic sites, museums and wineries. Recently, I have taken up horse riding, so you might find me at a riding lesson on my day off, too!"