

✠ ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Beyond The *Red* Door



ALTAR'D STATE INSIDE ST. STEPHEN'S

By E. Ray Walker

Next Sunday when you arrive at St. Stephen's, after your silent prayer and a minute or two of quiet contemplation, take a look around.

You will be surrounded by spectacular stained-glass scenes based on biblical themes. Truly inspiring.

There's the chancel at the front of the church. With the altar and cross ... for many, that is the definition of a church. Of course, it wouldn't be an Episcopal church without candles; they are essential.

And then there are the fresh flowers, representing the resurrection and new life, in a vase on each side of the cross. Flowers of beautiful seasonal or liturgical colors. Flowers of special significance for a parishioner. Flowers of ... just because, which is as good a reason as any.

Look, the Lord's Table awaits all. Seeing IS believing.

Behind this heavenly visage is the dedicated work of the St. Stephen's Altar Guild. Sunday after Sunday, month after month, season after season, the Guild prepares the church to be the beautiful and functional place it is meant to be.

Behind the scenes, this group of 18 to 20 volunteers, lead by its chairman, Randy Jones, ensures everything is just so for church services.

The marvelous altar flowers are one of the many facets of the Guild's work. For example, on Christmas Eve, St. Stephen's sparkles with festive decorations. Boundless Guild efforts made it all merry and bright.

Long before any parishioner arrives, the Altar Guild will have polished the sanctuary brass; hung a garland of evergreens on the arch; decorated the windowsills with fresh greens, globes and candles; placed fresh red poinsettias around the church; and switched the altar linens from Advent purple to Christmas white.



(Randy Jones with his dog, Decky)

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Whew! "Volunteer work" is still work.

"It is all tradition in respect for SSEC being the most beautiful sanctuary in Culpeper," Randy said last year.

Also, those gorgeous white lilies at Easter? Thanks, Guild volunteers.

But wait, there's more.

"The Altar Guild's charge is to set up the Lord's Table for services," Randy says.



(The altar set for Sunday Services)

That means preparing the sanctuary for services. That means clean and ironed altar linens; clean vessels for the wine and water; and clean chalice and wafer paten. And after the service, the Guild cleans up and makes ready for next Sunday.

At St. Stephen's, the Guild is split into teams, with Team 1 being responsible for the first Sunday of the month, Team 2 for the second and so on. Some teams get started with the work on Friday, others on Saturday.

Weddings and funerals are each different because of the preferences of the families. "These services are my responsibilities," Randy says.

There are many other tasks the Guild does weekly, including updating the Hymn Board on the wall to match the bulletin for the Sunday service.

The Guild's work is considered a sacred act of stewardship rather than a chores-based role. It is a contemplative ministry that fosters a deeper understanding of Episcopal liturgy and sacramental theology, according to The Episcopalian.

Guild members must be active St. Stephen's parishioners. "New members must go through training," Randy says. That training may include learning:

- The names of all parts of the church,
- Church seasons and colors,
- Names of linens and sacred vessels,
- The most widely used church symbols,
- The parish procedures for any sacrament or office of the church.

ABOUT THOSE FLOWERS

Among the rules the Guild follows: Episcopal altar flowers should match the liturgical season's designated color. Popular choices include lilies, roses and seasonal greens.

Important note to Guild newbies: Always trim the pollen-bearing stamens to protect sacred linens and in respect to people with pollen allergies. Pollen can cause permanent staining on expensive altar cloths and vestments.

Here are some seasonal flower suggestions:



(Annual Polishing of the Brass)

Easter and Christmas: White Easter lilies, white chrysanthemums and vibrant red poinsettias.

Sundays after Pentecost: The liturgical color is green, allowing for diverse floral arrangements, seasonal greenery, and bright, colorful blooms such as snapdragons and gladiolas.

Advent: Deep purples and blues.

Lent: Altar flowers are omitted during Lent to reflect the season's penitential, sober and austere nature, emphasizing focus on sacrifice and prayer over celebration. The bare altar visually represents a "spiritual desert," designed to turn attention to the coming passion of Jesus rather than decorative beauty, creating anticipation for the joy of Easter.

Feast Days, Weddings and Funerals: White and gold are primarily used for major feasts. White roses, orchids, and hydrangeas are widely popular choices for these occasions.

Spring/Summer: Tulips, peonies and sunflowers.

Autumn: Hydrangeas and goldenrods.

Winter: Amaryllis, hellebores and narcissi.



(The Greening of the Church)

Randy notes that daffodils and dahlias are not easily used in the vases, “Daff’s are too short and do not like the arranging foam; dahlias generally have large irregular stems.”

Randy knows his flowers. For 40 years he owned and operated the legendary Randy’s Flowers in Culpeper. It will take a brave soul to argue flowers with him.

What flowers are inappropriate for altars? A good question, and a definitive answer.

Absolutely no — zilch, zip, zed, zero — fake flowers. Artificial, plastic or silk flowers are strictly forbidden. The altar represents living sacrifice, so blooms must naturally fade and perish. (You will not find this prohibition anywhere in the Holy Bible, but it ought to be. Thus sayeth St. Anonymous.)

Arrangements should be designed not to block the visibility of the celebrant or interfere with the space needed to administer Holy Communion.

At St. Stephen’s, altar flowers are sponsored by congregants in memory of loved ones or to mark a special occasion. To learn about sponsoring an arrangement, check with Randy or church administrator Karyn Sizemore (ssec@ststephensculpeper.net). The church gets its flowers from Adorn Florals & Gifts, and the cost is \$75. The sponsors can take the flowers with them after the Sunday service or can direct that they be given to a worthy organization such as The Culpeper senior citizens center.

A lifelong Culpeper resident, Randy says, “I am a member of the Altar Guild as a service to the Lord and His table, not for recognition. The guild works out of sight, and we are responsible to Father Trent (Moore, the church’s rector). When my predecessor retired, I asked (then rector) Father Ben (Shelton) for his consideration. I am thankful for his trust.”

St. Stephen’s is genuinely blessed to have Randy and a dedicated Altar Guild, all masters of decorative arts. Together, they make Sundays special for all. Look for yourself. Seeing is believing.

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“New members are welcome,” Randy says. Anyone interested in becoming a member of this dedicated team should email Randy at culpeperva@hotmail.com.

SEASONS AND COLORS

Advent: Begins the church year on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. Colors: Purple or Royal Blue.

Christmas: Begins on December 25 and lasts for 12 days. Colors; White or Gold.

Epiphany: Begins on January 6 and extends until the start of Lent. Color: Green.

Lent: Spanning 40 days (excluding Sundays) starting on Ash Wednesday. Color: Purple.

Easter: Lasts for 50 days, starting on Easter Sunday and concluding on the Day of Pentecost. Colors: White or Gold.

Pentecost and **The Season After Pentecost:** Day of Pentecost. Color: Red. Season After Pentecost: The long season that ends with the start of Advent. Color: Green,