

A VISIT WITH THE RECTOR

Before Duane Nettles departed his hometown of New Orleans and became the new Rector at Grace & Holy Trinity, he already had connections and attachments in Virginia.

“The path to here began when I was a child,” he says. “My grandparents loved the mountains of Virginia, and they would put me and my cousins in a travel trailer behind their Suburban and drive up in the summer to stay in campgrounds in the national parks. On those trips I fell in love with the beauty of the state.” After the heartache and labor that followed Hurricane Katrina, a priest suggested that Duane come up to spend some restorative time at Richmond Hill, and he rested there on three occasions, sitting in the sunroom, looking over Shockoe Bottom and the City to the west beyond.

Then six years ago, when GHTC’s Assistant Rector Kim Reinholz was expecting a baby and not traveling, the mission trip to Belize needed a chaplain in tow. Because he had several families among his Louisiana congregants who had emigrated from Belize, his name came up, and off he went. His two years with the Belize mission team were fruitful, and when this church’s search for a new Rector began, some of that team suggested he apply.

When he arrived to begin his ministry here, things were far from ordinary. COVID had done away with in-person services, and he began by preaching to an empty church. Characteristically, rather than seeing this as a stumbling block, he embraced what he could do with it. “The great gift to me was that all I could do was meet my new congregation one or two at a time,” he says.

“Many things I didn’t have to be busy with yet, because the machine just wasn’t running. I came to believe that every new Rector ought to overlap with the Interim. All he or she has to do is go around and have lunch and coffee and drinks with the members of the congregation, and get to know them.”

When asked about this tendency to make lemonade from the lemons that land in the way, he says emphatically that you have to look for the advantages to be found in any situation. “Life is full of things you can’t do,” he says, “but you have to focus on what you can do.” He smiles, and quotes Desmond Tutu: “The only way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time.”

From the beginning, he recognized that Grace & Holy Trinity was looking for a focused effort on Christian formation, particularly for young families. On his first Easter Sunday morning in the church, of the 125 or so people in attendance, a quarter of them were children younger than eight. “The flowering of the cross took eight stanzas! It was wonderful.” Right off the bat, he said to himself, “We don’t have a children and youth issue – we have a children and youth ministry issue.”

The vestry agreed, and Kyle Bomar and Kate Given joined the staff. They were chosen in part for the warmth and joy they bring to their work. It’s clear that Duane is a warm and joyful person himself. Over and over, when parishioners are asked what they think of having him as Rector, they remark on his warmth, his good humor, and the joy he brings to this work we ask him to do. He means to bring people together, in every sense of that word. “The main purpose of church is the worship of God,” he says, “but how you



get to that is based on people knowing one another. That’s where the sense of welcome comes from. You begin opening up and sharing real things about your life, and that gives meaning to your prayer and opens real conversations about the scripture, about what you believe, and what it means.”

He also has experience with how church and state can form connections that have nothing to do with politics, and everything to do with civic responsibility. “I believe that there are two institutions ordained by God,” he says, “The government is God’s hand of justice, and the church is God’s hand of mercy. They work together.” Duane has seen that although three quarters of GHTC’s membership lives outside of Fan, what draws them back into the center is the good we can do in and for the City of Richmond. “The church is a connector,” he says, “and lots of young families want that connection. It’s a real opportunity for us.”

He sees that strengthening the community of this church is how we feed and condition ourselves as the body of Christ, and builds the energy and stamina to serve our purpose in the world beyond it. Every day, respecting the dignity and humanity that informs the Episcopal tradition, we take another bite out of the elephant.

— Ann Norvell Gray

