

Looking Forward: A Report of the Priest-in-Charge for the 2025 St. Francis Annual Meeting

"Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life." —John 8:12

"The longer I live, the more deeply I learn that love—whether we call it friendship, family, or romance—is the work of mirroring and magnifying each other's light. Gentle work. Steadfast work. Life-saving work in those moments when life and shame and sorrow occlude our own light from our view, but there is still a clear-eyed loving person to beam it back. In our best moments, we are that person for another." —James Baldwin

Dear Beloved Friends of St. Francis,

As I reflect on our journey together, I am filled with deep gratitude for the ways we are opening ourselves to receive God's light and blessings. The purpose of the church, for me, is to form people into the kinds of souls who can receive and reflect God's gifts. At our best, we are a house of prayer for all people, and we care for every generation. It is my joy and privilege to be part of your spiritual journey and to help each of you grow in faith and grace.

Rather than focusing on the past year, I want to look ahead. This report is a call to each of you to engage with the exciting resurgence happening here at St. Francis. There is abundant life within us and in the surrounding community of Great Falls—life that we are called to embrace and share. Together, let us look to 2025 with hopeful hearts, ready to receive the love God will give us and reflect it back into the world.

New Opportunities & Invitations to Build

I am excited about the search for a *new Director of Family Ministries*, a role that will strengthen our ministry to children, youth, and families. Six committed Franciscans, alongside the Vestry and me, are working diligently to identify the right person—either lay or ordained—to serve in this vital role. Please pray for this process as it unfolds this year.

As we move into 2025, *our St. Francis Creche School*, under the leadership of Director Cristi Leslie, continues to thrive with around 55 children attending weekly. I thoroughly enjoy leading chapel on Wednesdays and visiting with our smallest ones most Thursdays. Cristi is preparing for retirement, and we are currently reviewing applications for a new Director to ensure a smooth transition. The demand for spots at the Creche remains high, and we look forward to growing this vital ministry. The next "Creche Sunday" is in May—spread the word to families who may be interested in joining us!

I'm thrilled to announce the *launch of a new Second Sunday Contemplative Service* beginning in February 2025. Led by Music Director Larry Vote and me, this service will offer a quiet, reflective space for worship with music, poetry, silence, and Communion. The service will also feature a reflection by a Franciscan on their spiritual journey. We will hold this service monthly on the second Sunday at 5 p.m., with a trial period throughout the year. At year's end, we will evaluate the service based on your feedback. Interested in helping? Reach out to Larry or me, and invite your friends to experience this contemplative worship style.

In early February, I will return to my alma mater, Virginia Theological Seminary, to meet with *prospective seminarians for the 2025-2026 academic year*. This is a significant investment of time for me and a lay support team during the academic year, but I think reconnecting with VTS is an important part growing stronger. While we cannot guarantee a seminarian, the opportunity to mentor one and watch them grow alongside our community is always a blessing. Please keep this discernment process in your prayers.

This year, we will **celebrate Scout Sunday** on February 2, and I'm exploring ways to incorporate Scouts into our regular Sunday worship as acolytes. Please join us for this special service and make an effort to welcome the Scouts and their families.

Strengthening Pastoral Care is a top priority for me. Many of you have expressed a desire to strengthen our care for one another. I am excited to share that we are in the process of discerning the **possibility of bringing a part-time Priest Associate for Pastoral Care** on board to help with this ministry. This priest would assist in providing support for our growing congregation. The Vestry will be reviewing this decision soon, and I encourage you to share your thoughts with them as this conversation unfolds.

We are also in the process of **forming a Grief Group** led by Franciscans to offer support to those who are mourning. If you or someone you know might be interested in joining, please reach out to me so I can connect you with this meaningful ministry.

In addition, I will be **leading the Inquirers Class in Spring 2025**, on Wednesday nights beginning February 5. This class offers a welcoming space for newcomers and long-time members alike to explore the faith and deepen their understanding of our traditions. Whether you're preparing for baptism, confirmation, reception, or reaffirmation of vows, this class is a wonderful opportunity for spiritual growth.

We are also collaborating with Shell Fischer, a renowned Insight Meditation teacher and Director of Mindful Valley, to **host two silent meditation retreats in July and October 2025**. These retreats will bring people from across the region to St. Francis, providing a chance for us to welcome new people into our community while supporting the church's mission and outreach.

Ongoing Opportunities & New Invitations to Build

As we seek after our loving God in 2025, I invite you to continue engaging with the rhythms of prayer that are at the heart of our community. Join us for **Morning Prayer on Zoom** each weekday at 8 a.m. or consider attending our Contemplative Prayer Group. Common prayer is a powerful force that sustains us as we grow in faith together.

Sunday worship attendance continues to grow, thanks in no small part to your faithful invitations to friends and neighbors. Keep inviting! As we continue to grow, I invite you to **consider joining the Invite, Welcome, Connect Committee**. This team is key in welcoming newcomers and helping them find their place at St. Francis. They have made a tremendous impact, and I encourage you to consider joining them in this important ministry.

We also have an ongoing need for **volunteers in the St. Francis Nursery**. If you feel called to help care for our youngest members and offer parents the space to worship, please consider volunteering with our nursery team.

Connecting People to Build a Hub of Communal Creativity & Compassion

In 2025, **St. Francis Community Music & Theater will flourish even more** with an exciting slate of performances, including concerts by Words & Music, Amadeus Concerts, a collaboration with Sasha Beresovsky and Paragon Philharmonia, Dark Horse Theater, and the **extraordinary St. Francis Choir's rendition of Liszt's "Via Crucis" during Lent**. There will be ample opportunities to experience the arts and sacred music at St. Francis, and I encourage you to attend and invite others to join us. If you'd like to help build a thriving arts culture here, bring your friends to a performance!

We are also beginning the process of **discerning whether St. Francis is ready for a non-stipendiary Episcopal deacon**—a servant-leader who could support our outreach efforts and help lead in worship. This is a

significant conversation, and I invite your thoughts and feedback as we consider the next steps in this discernment process.

Our *relationship with the Young Men's Service League (YMSL) of Great Falls* begins in 2025 as we look forward to hosting them for a day of service and fellowship on **February 1**. I invite you to build deeper connections with these mothers and teenage sons who are making a difference in our community.

Ongoing Opportunities to Build and Serve

Our *Outreach Partners continue to do vital work in the world*—such as Second Story, Samaritan Ministries, the Pine Ridge Mission in South Dakota, and the Diocese of Ezo in South Sudan. As a community, we regularly support these organizations through prayer, financial giving, and our physical presence as volunteers. I invite you to become more engaged in their work and volunteer your time or talents this year.

In addition, we are *planning a visit from Bishop Isaac Ephraim of the Diocese of Ezo in early 2026*. This will be an exciting opportunity for us to engage with our global mission and strengthen our partnership with the people of South Sudan. Please save the date for **Ezo Sunday** on March 2, 2025, to learn more about our ongoing work together.

Cultivating a Year-Round Culture of Stewardship

I am grateful for your *generosity in this year's Stewardship Campaign*, which thus far has raised \$550,000—an increase over last year's total. We are well on our way, but there is still room to grow toward our goal of \$600,000. The *planning for the 2026 Stewardship Campaign* will begin after Holy Week, with a fall forum in late September to celebrate our shared ministry and kick off next year's efforts.

Our *Facilities Management Committee continues to do excellent work* keeping our buildings and grounds in top shape. If you feel called to help maintain our beautiful space, please contact Brice Eldridge.

My Ministry in the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia

In addition to serving our community as Priest-in-Charge of St. Francis, I also serve as an elected leader in the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia as a member of the Standing Committee. We meet once per month with Bishop Mark Stevenson at St. George's in Fredericksburg. In this role, I work with 11 other clergy and lay leaders as the Bishop's Council of Advice, consent to and interview candidates for ordination to the priesthood and vocational diaconate, and consent to matters of church property and indebtedness. Finally, I work with the Standing Committee to consent to the confirmation of bishops-elect in The Episcopal Church.

You Are the Church

You are St. Francis. If we are successful in *our mutual ministry*, we will be a church that is *led primarily by laypeople, with clergy supporting and empowering your work*. As we step into 2025, I ask you: What kind of church do you want to build and what risks are you willing to take for the Gospel? What gifts do you hope to receive this year? And, just as importantly, what gifts do you feel called to share?

Let's ask ourselves: Who is not yet at the table? Who can we welcome into this vibrant community of light, love, and service?

It is more important to be good ancestors of the future than dutiful descendants of the past. We are off to a good start together. I pray we will continue to strengthen each other in mutual ministry for years to come. Thank you for every way you are a blessing to my family and our community.

God bless you and keep you,

Weston

The Rev. E. Weston Mathews

Priest-in-Charge

St. Francis in Great Falls