

A Pastor's Report to the Washington Church of the New Jerusalem
for the semi-annual meeting of November 13th, 2009
by the Rev. Michael Gladish

Dear Friends,

I know it is not your custom to have pre-circulated reports for your society meetings but I would like to initiate pastor's reports at the very least, to help you prepare for some of the issues that may be discussed.

First, let me say that Ginny and I could not be happier than we are to be here. We have been most graciously welcomed into your home and church life and we are both very enthusiastic about living, working – and playing – with you. In particular I have been impressed with very many aspects of what you have already developed here, and I am keen to face with you the challenges that are before us.

Obviously one of the pressing concerns is the matter of building space for church and school development. Of course there's no shortage of land, but we continue to wrestle with the issue of priorities for our building committee, not to mention the shortage of income to do all that we would like. These are not the biggest issues, though. As you are all keenly aware the society has been through a difficult time spiritually over the last few years and so my first purpose in serving you is to try to resolve – or help resolve – some of those difficulties.

To this end (aside from learning everything I can about the church here) my focus so far has been on simple but significant things like pastoral visiting, establishing new committees and councils with clear mandates and job descriptions, leading and reassuring our school staff and presenting my best possible sermons to the congregation. Our new outreach committee, for example, includes 10 members, all of whom are very enthusiastic and full of creative ideas about the work before us. And the new pastor's council is an excellent group of 12 representative members from almost all sectors of the congregation. Our first meeting was extremely positive and promises good leadership counsel – which hopefully will help build confidence in the church overall.

A small committee is also working at an accelerating pace on renewing and rebuilding the Washington Society website, which has needed work for a long time. This is proving to be a complex and time consuming job, *and (hint!) we could use more technical help*, but thanks to our secretary, Bonnie Cowley and other volunteers it is coming along. Soon we may be registering a new, simpler, easy to read domain name that we hope to use in a variety of creative and interesting advertising venues; you will smile when you see what we have in mind.

On the practical side, this is not the place to get into details but I would like you all to know that the facilities committee, the planning committee and the contributions committee have all been busy over the last few months refining the plans that are already in place and preparing for the next steps. In addition, the Acton Park board faced yet another development hurdle with PG County government, but the good news is that they have now overcome this last barrier and are currently in process of putting out for tender the actual construction of roads, sewers and so on.

You will be hearing a lot more about this in coming months as it will be a critical component of our future as a church and school congregation.

Even so, thinking of construction projects, we recognize that a somewhat cautious approach is needed at this time of economic uncertainty. As our church attendance has declined in recent years it does not make sense for us to plunge headlong into new, larger sanctuary planning – *yet*. Instead we want to focus on continuing development of the school, of our worship services, and of our outreach programs, so that new and old members will be attracted to the church and help us rebuild spiritually for a bright future. In short we want to provide a welcoming, inspiring and intellectually invigorating environment that leads to growth not for its own sake but for the sake of the uses that the church represents. Of course we already have a fairly urgent need for new and improved spaces for church and school uses, and we are working on that.

Meanwhile the regular work of the church goes on, including a surprising number of delightful small groups meeting in the relaxed atmosphere of private homes for study and discussion. This is a wonderful feature of this society that clearly demonstrates your commitment to spiritual growth as well as mutual support, friendship and social life. Frankly, I am often amazed at how much work and dedication many of you put into this church and what it stands for.

Still, returning to the topic of economic uncertainty, I'd be remiss if I didn't note that we are faced at present with a most peculiar situation – a real challenge and a real opportunity all rolled into one. First, as you will see in the treasurer's report at the meeting, the congregation is facing a rather serious deficit in its annual budget. This may be attributed to various causes but the bottom line is that we need to get back on track, and we need to do it as quickly as possible without harassing people. How can we accomplish this?

One way would be for everyone to give just a little more – and especially for those who are not in the habit of giving to give a little something every week or month. Just \$10 a week would be over \$500 in a year, and if, say, 50 members were to add this amount to their expense budget, bingo! – we'd have another \$25,000 to support our programs. And what is \$10 a week? – 2 meals at McDonald's?

Another way to knock the deficit on the head would be for all of us to consider some sort of percentage giving. Many churches ask their members to tithe (give 10%); *we don't*, and I personally don't believe we should. The tithe in Scripture is a representative figure symbolizing all that a person is able to give – up front, in gratitude for all that the Lord provides. But consider this: if everyone earning at least \$50,000 a year in family income were to contribute only 3% of that amount, and there were 150 of us doing it, we would have \$225,000 not counting our investment income. Then again, if 50 of those used the same percentage at \$100,000 of income we would have \$300,000. And what is 3% compared to the many luxuries we take for granted?

The thing is, we do expect about \$270,000 in contributions from members, but a high percentage of that comes from a relatively few heavy hitters and based on the above reasoning we feel sure we could do better.

So now I need to explain the REAL challenge. With the introduction of the General Church's Capital Campaign every one of us has the opportunity to have our special contributions, above and beyond those for the program budget, matched FOURFOLD. So if any of us can dig a little deeper, even just once, and make a special donation for our local building fund, this will be matched here by one of our own members ***and then that total amount will be matched again*** by funds coming out of the international church endowment ***for our use locally***. So let's say you can find an extra \$100 any time in the next year or so; if you give that locally as a donation to our building fund it will become \$400 without any extra effort on your part and bring us that much closer to some very much needed improvements in our sanctuary, our office space, our meeting rooms and our school.

This program is what was referred to in a recent mailing as the "Healthy Church Match" portion of the Capital Campaign. If you have any questions about it, before you fill out the pledge form that came in the mailing please do not hesitate to contact me, the treasurer, or any member of the church board. It's a major opportunity for us to make significant progress in a hurry, and wouldn't that be nice!

In conclusion I'd like to focus again on the uses we try so hard to support. The overall purpose of the church is to help ourselves and others – as many as possible – to grow ever closer to the Lord Jesus Christ in His Second Coming. This is done through inspirational and instructive worship services, classes for all different levels of inquiry, distinctive, quality social life and a well planned outreach program. These are all things you have an unassuming history of doing well and yet they can all be done even better, especially when new creative minds are added to the congregation.

Thanksgiving will soon be upon us, and then Christmas, and in the new year we have a special treat in store for you with a dynamic guest speaker already lined up for our Swedenborg banquet. Each of these events will feature some new elements that we hope you will find enriching and rewarding. As well, we have some new thoughts about evening vesper services and holy suppers – not to add to the burden of an already heavy schedule but to consolidate and to provide new opportunities for those who may be interested.

I want to thank your assistant pastor, the Rev. Michael Ferrell, for his tremendous encouragement and support in these my first few months with you, and also to thank Mr. Ronnie Schnarr for his enthusiastic support during his candidacy here. I admit I was a bit dubious about having a young candidate right off the bat, but he has been most helpful and added significantly to the program.

Finally, I want to thank all of you for your incredibly warm welcome, your commitment to the church, and your thoughtful, caring work week in and week out to let the Lord's light shine for each other, for your children and for the many who will come to learn about the New Church.