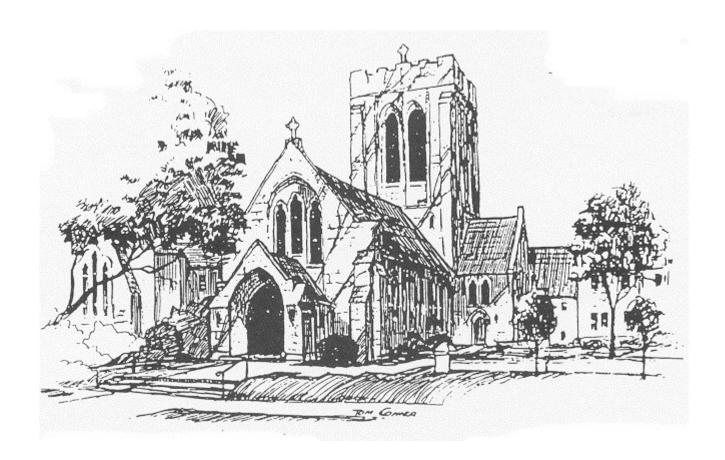


# Church of the Ascension 2023 Annual Report

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# Rector's Report

We believe in sharing love and grace with God and one another.

I am sometimes asked about this why statement that litters the front of our bulletins, eTower, website, and is even on the lamppost banners outside. It is a simple statement, maybe even somewhat generic, that succinctly describes our purpose and existence—love and grace. There aren't that many places in the world where you can find love and grace given without expectation or judgment. Yet, at Ascension that is our aspiration. Though it seems a simple statement, it is deeply complex and involved. It requires a lot of effort to share love and grace and a lot of time and commitment by clergy, laity, and staff. Together, in partnership with one another, our sharing of that love and grace is how we build up the kingdom of God.

This past year, 2023, has been filled with hopes and joys as well as challenges and changes. We seem to have finally shaken the cobwebs of a pandemic that fundamentally changed us, realigned our priorities, and afforded us new opportunities. Not all of which was good, but that which challenged us was met with tenacity and the encouragement of the Holy Spirit that is alive and well at CoA. As a family, we experience our frustrations with one another, and our relationships can get a little mucky. As long as we keep showing up and working to stay connected to one another, we discover that reconciliation is possible. It does not mean that we will agree with one another, but it can be a means of deepening our relationship with others... that is what sharing love and grace is all about.

With an average Sunday attendance (ASA) of 184, Ascension is a Transitional Size Parish (ASA 141-224). That name can be a little misleading as it implies we are either growing to a Program Size Parish (ASA 225-800) or shrinking to a Pastoral Size Parish (ASA 76-140), moving from one size to another. That is not necessarily the case. Transitional Size Parishes are a legitimate sized congregation which may well stay in that ASA range of 141-224 for many years.

Each of the various sizes of a parish comes with gifts and challenges that define its identity and purpose. At Ascension, we have seen challenges related to inclusion, information, attention of the rector, and what is being neglected in our mission and ministry. All of that is relevant to our current experience as well as a reflection of classic issues faced by a congregation of our size. The joy is that as we name our challenges and recognize our gifts of strong membership commitment, growing vitality through our newcomer's ministry, outreach and mission efforts, connection with our community, and love of worship we discover that what shapes us and makes us whole is found in the tension of holding both our challenges and our gifts together.

As a Transitional Size Parish we face challenges and opportunities. Our biggest struggles are reflected in a congregation that is too large for everyone to know everyone else. We exist in between the personal intimacy of a Pastoral Size Parish and the cohesive subgroups of a Program Size Parish. As it is difficult for everyone to know everyone else, the leadership of the parish has the responsibility of driving a more inclusive approach to mission and ministry that is guided and supported by the rector and vestry. At this size, there is a true need for increased staffing, yet that staffing is limited by budgetary restrictions. The model encourages effective relationships between staff and lay leaders to facilitate programming to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse membership to grow. One response to that need is in how we have reshaped our children's and youth ministry to have a more inclusive and broad approach toward the spiritual health of families not simply individuals therein.

With the hiring of Laura and Nick Mielke as the Family Formation Ministry Team we hope to encourage a more inclusive faith formation for all generations. Laura has a stronger focus on children and Nick on youth, but they share many of the responsibilities in coordinating this ministry. The hope is that as we focus on the spiritual health of the family as a whole, we begin to shape our families in the love of Christ. Through active formation opportunities like Wednesday Night Live and more passive ones like Pew Tips, families engage in conversation and faithful practices that lead to more deeply fulfilling spiritual lives. Nick and Laura both have backgrounds in working with children and youth. As parents themselves, they demonstrate a capable and inspiring amount of energy in the nurturance of our families.

One of the significant differences in this approach to Family Formation is the inclusion of more parents and adults in volunteer aspects of working with children and teens. In the past few years, we have seen children and youth volunteers grow from less than a dozen to more than forty people including parents and non-parents alike. Adult volunteers help with Sunday School, Wednesday Night Live, EYC, Mission trips, VBS, Children's Church, and a plethora of other ministries. This inter-generational focus reminds us that we are all part of the church in the here and now. Our children and youth are not a future ministry, but a present one. Our willingness to give of ourselves, our energy, and our time in ministry is one way in which each of us nurtures and grows in our own spiritual development as well as contributing to the spiritual health of the whole.

Not only are more people volunteering in various capacities of the church, we have seen an increase in our average Sunday attendance. Average Sunday attendance dropped to 114 in 2021, in great part as a response to the stressors of the pandemic and the various strands of Corona virus that beleaguered Ascension not to mention the rest of the world. Coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic we saw our numbers rise to an ASA of 167 in 2022 and they continue to rise as our **2023 Average Sunday Attendance** increased again to 184. These numbers are not as high as they were pre-pandemic, however they are better than the national average and demonstrate cause for hope. I caution us not to expect a move to a Program Size Parish (ASA 225-800) in the near future. However, I do believe we are putting in positive structures and finding ways to encourage and invite others into partnership with God and one another that are building up the kingdom. Not only are we experiencing a positive trend in the vitality of ministry and growing ASA, we are also seeing positive expressions of growth in plate and pledge.

Our plate and pledge continue to increase. In 2023, our membership pledged \$1,023,446.29. In 2024, our membership increased their commitment to give to God and his work through CoA to \$1,025,396.04—a difference of \$1949.75 more this year. Though statistically this is an incremental amount, when you factor in lost pledges due to those who have died and moved, we are doing better than expected. Due to your giving and good financial stewardship, we have been blessed with a reserve that continues to grow each year. Though the church Is not in the business of "making money" a cash reserve is important in supporting unforeseen needs such as maintenance or new ministry initiatives. We continue to grow that reserve even as we have had to dip into it to support financial shortfalls this past year. This helps us offer consistent worship, outreach, and programming throughout the year as we live into a theology of abundance versus the fear of scarcity.

In 2023, we worked toward the start of two new ministry initiatives—a Newcomer's Committee and an Ingathering Outreach initiative. Both proved successful. Nelson "Smitty" Smith has taken the lead in establishing the Newcomer's Committee through recruiting a diverse group of parishioners, establishing purpose and direction, and beginning to initiate actions such as monthly tours and newcomer swag. See his report on the incredible things this group is doing to help us be an inviting and inclusive parish. The In-gathering initiative supported a couple of pilot drives last year including tornado relief for Dallas County. That was met with great enthusiasm and success. We are currently working on the structure of that initiative for 2024—stay tuned!

There are a lot of exciting things happening at Ascension and you are a big part of that. When we share in love and grace with God and one another, we assume a partnership that is bigger than any one person and can do more than we might ask or imagine. Loving Ascension is not about what we can do, but about what we can become. I look forward to the realization of our possibilities as we partner with God and one another in 2024.

Light and Life, Candice+

# **Associate Rector's Report**

I continue to give thanks for the opportunity to serve as your associate rector here at The Episcopal Church of the Ascension. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to learn from each of you and from Candice+. As I reflect on my time with you, it is sometimes hard to believe that I have been here more than three years now. As I look back over the last year, I am especially grateful for the opportunity to pray, worship and learn with you. It has been a year full of opportunities from leading clergy forum, men's prayer breakfast and to participating in Sunday School with our youth and Bread of Life.

As I look out across the pews on Sunday mornings and see so many faces both new and familiar, I am reminded of how grateful I am that I get to serve God's church here. I have enjoyed getting to visit with so many of you and look forward to growing those relationships and beginning new ones. We continue to see new faces in the pews and in our school. Leading chapel on Thursday mornings with some of our day school students is one of the high-lights of my week. Children never cease to amaze me in their joy for learning and loving. They continually show and teach me how to love more fully and inclusively.

In addition to leading classes, worship and preaching, I also look forward to working with our youth who serve as acolytes. I am grateful for their service and for how much they add to our experience of worship here at Ascension. Our youth are a testament to the future of the church not only in their commitment to our worship but also through their participation in EYC, diocesan events such as Summer Camp, Happening, and Christmas Conference just to name a few. I had the privilege of serving as a spiritual director for one of the Happenings earlier this year and can attest to the deep desire of our youth to grow their relationships with God and with each other. I also had the opportunity to go on our Youth Mission Trip to Navajoland this year. We worshipped and worked with the good people of St. Christopher's Mission which is part of the Episcopal Church in Navajoland in Bluff, UT. The journey was not only a mission trip but also a pilgrimage as we sought together to grow our understanding of the church's difficult history with indigenous persons. The precious seeds of learning and understanding were sown, and I look forward to watching them bear fruit in the years to come.

As we continue the work of becoming God's beloved community, we hosted youth from across the diocese and the country here at Ascension for the Jonathan Daniel's Youth Lock-In. Our youth engaged with others their age in discussions about race and our history and then participated in the annual Jonathan Daniel's Pilgrimage in Hayneville, AL in August. The desire to be curious and open minded and the compassion expressed by our youth never ceases to amaze me. I also had the opportunity to again assist in this work in hosting Episcopal seminarians from the Seminary of the Southwest as they made their way to Alabama to visit historic Civil Rights sites, The Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, the Jonathan Daniels Pilgrimage and the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Our location here in Montgomery among so many important historic sites and institutions allows us the opportunity to help serve as ambassadors for this important and continuing work of racial reconciliation.

It is truly a gift to be a member of this community and give thanks to God for his blessing on it as we continue to work together seeking God's calling to us of the shared ministry of spreading his love. Be it in the various ministries of outreach, in our shared worship and learning or in our fellowship, the members of the The Episcopal Church of the Ascension continue to grow in their love of each other so that they might share that love into our wider community. Allison and I are so thankful for your friendship and love and look forward to another year of shared ministry with all of you.

Grace and Peace,

Drew+

# **Building and Grounds Report**

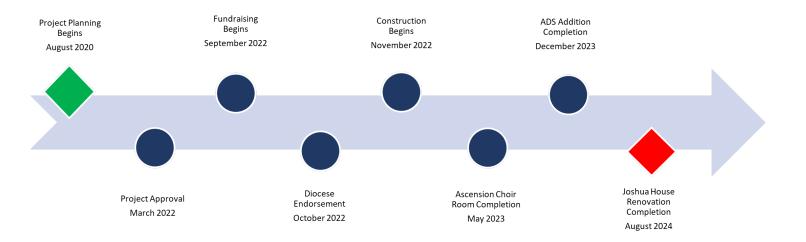
The building and grounds improvements continued to be a focus of 2023, highlighted by the completion of the first two phases of our Capital Campaign project. The amazing new Choir Loft was completed in May, and the ADS addition was completed in December. The utilization of these new and updated spaces has been high point in 2023, and we are eagerly awaiting the culmination of the project with the Joshua House renovation with an expected completion date of August 2024.

ADS inspires "The Way" for all the little ones that journey through our halls.

The choir inspires "The Truth" through the music of our beautiful liturgy in knowing God.

Our neighborhood represents "**The Life**" with which we continue to grow in relationship as we build God's Kingdom in the Garden District.

### Estimated Timeline of Construction Completion for The Way, The Truth, and The Life Capital Campaign



In addition to the Capital Campaign, many other maintenance projects were completed in 2023. These include:

- Re-sodding of Columbarium
- Numerous HVAC Repairs
- Joshua House prepared for ADS construction overflow
- Temporary Relocation of ADS to Joshua House for Construction
- ADS Entry Doors Refinished

- ADS Classrooms and Nurseries Repainted after Remodel
- ADS Furniture Assembly
- ADS Cabinets and Shelving installed
- Sprinkler System Repairs

As we look to 2024, we are happy to share our newest project, the remodel of several of our older bathrooms. Funds have been approved by the Vestry and we are now working with an interior designer and contractor for pricing and a timeline. Stay tuned!

# **Financial Report**

Receipts:	Actual	Budget	
Plate Pledge Other	5,718 1,000,561 251,264	7,000 1,023,447 254,980	
TOTAL	1,257,543	1,285,427	(27,883)
Expenses:	Actual	Budget	
Outreach Salaries Administrative Programs	152,551 746,208 331,679 43,497	158,068 767,310 349,223 42,960	
TOTAL	1,273,937	1,317,561	43,623
	(16,393)	(32,134)	

### Stewardship 2024

### **Capital Campaign**

Pledge cards received 157
Pledge total \$1,025,396

Pledge cards received 82
Pledge total \$2,250,940

### 2022 and 2023 comparison:

- 23 decreased
- 37 increased
- 20 new
- 77 no change



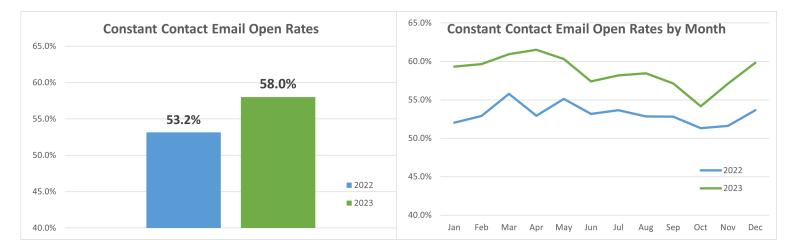
# **Outreach Report**

Renascence Medical Outreach Ministries Family Promise World Central Kitchen Beans & Rice Ministry CoA Food Box distribution United Way of Selma and Dalla Central Alabama Community F American Red Cross - disaster Montgomery Area Council on A Sawyerville Aid to Inmate Mothers Montgomery Area Food Bank Many Colors Arts Collective Mercy House	oundation - disaster relief relief Aging	\$ 8,000 \$4,000 \$3,000 \$2,500 \$131 \$1,457 \$450 \$450 \$450 \$450 \$3,000 \$3,000 \$3,500 \$15,000
	<b>Total Outreach Grants</b>	\$52,938
Other Outreach Donations		
From Vineyard:		
Dream Court		\$1,000
Respite		\$1,000
Family Sunshine Center		\$1,000
Renascence		\$1,000
TOTAL		\$4,000
From Altar Guild:		
Ascension Day School		\$1,100
Angel Food		\$700
TOTAL		\$1,800
From Lobster Fest:		
Ascension Day School		\$1,208
Respite		\$1,208
TOTAL		\$2,416
	Total All Outreach Giving	\$61,154

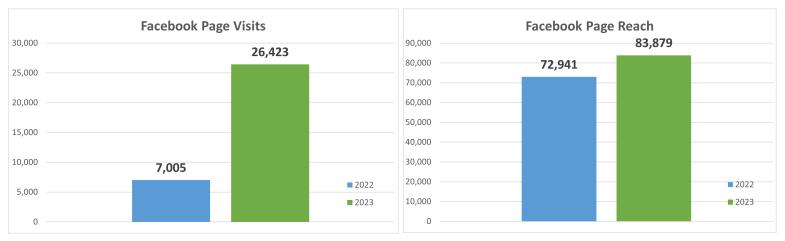
# Communications Report

2023 was an exciting year in communications and social media. We started some new programs and streamlined some others. We began a texting program to remind users of important events or share timely information. We do limit texting to no more than 2 per month so your phone will not be bombarded with updates from us. If you are interested but not currently enrolled in our texting program please let us know! Below are metrics and communications statistics as well as some things to look forward to in the year to come.

The primary responsibility I am tasked with is communicating with and distributing information to parishioners, and the main tool I use to distribute information is Constant Contact. This allows us to send emails to large groups as well as send targeted messages to specific groups. In 2023, we sent over 108,000 individual messages, which is up from 94,000 in 2022. One of the other metrics we use to track the effectiveness of our communications is open rate, or the % of messages that are opened by the recipient. The graphs below compare open rates in 2023 against previous year as well as trending by month. Our open rate increased almost 5% in 2023, and as you might expect we see increased open rates around Easter and Christmas, with a little dip in the summer months.



We also saw some amazing growth in our social media reach in 2023. We track this by analyzing page visits and page views. Page visits are the number of times our page was visited, and page reach is the number of people who saw our content while scrolling. Our reach increased on about the same level as last year but our visits exploded! Let's all continue to engage with our social media and keep these numbers trending in the right direction.



We have some exciting initiatives for 2024 including website enhancements and church signage updates and improvements. We are also kicking off our return to Instagram and have lots of great ideas to utilize this tool to spread our message of sharing love and grace in 2024.

# **Family & Faith Formation Ministry**

In the first half of 2023 the Family & Faith Formation Ministry was carried out under the leadership of Audry Mercer. In the spring the Children and Youth of Ascension participated in a variety of spiritually uplifting and valuable activities. Everything from the annual Epiphany Chili Cook Off, to Palm Sunday and Easter activities, and on through Vacation Bible School as hosted at St. John's downtown. The Youth of Ascension had the opportunity to participate in a robust weekly EYC program that consisted of games, food, fellowship, service, and spiritual development. During the summer of 2023 three youth and four adults spent 10 days of travel, reflection and service with our Episcopal brothers and sisters in Navajoland in South Dakota.

In May of 2023 Audrey Mercer announced the end of her tenure as Family & Faith Formation minister at Ascension. Candice, Drew, and a select committee began advertising and searching for a potential replacement. In July of 2023 it was announced that the search committee had recommended the hire of Ascension members Laura and Nick Mielke to co-lead the Family & Faith Formation ministries of the church. Laura's primary focus would be on Children's ministries (having served for many years in the elementary school setting) and Nick's focus would be on Youth ministries (drawing from his years of full-time youth ministry. Laura and Nick together would also focus on "Family and Intergenerational" events together as a part of this shared role. They began their work officially the second week of August 2023.

The Mielkes hit the ground running in August with the start of school as well as Sunday and Wednesday evening programming. Focusing on organized, consistent, and well staffed Children's and Youth Sunday School programs, Wednesday evening choir and fellowship time, and EYC (Episcopal Youth Community) has been a cornerstone of the ever growing Family Formation programs. Special events in the fall included Church of the Ascension's "Good Vibrations" celebration to welcome everyone back to the new school year. Another great fall event was Ascension's first annual All Hallow's Fest which included games, trunk or treat, food trucks and live music which was enjoyed by Ascension families, ADS families, and Ascension neighbors. During Advent Children, Youth, their families, and Ascension family of all ages enjoyed making Chrismons, celebrating our annual tree trim with New Beginnings, making pinecone bird feeders, as well as weekly compline and fellowship time. The annual Ascension Christmas pageant was another bright spot during Advent that lead us right up to our Christmas Eve Family Eucharist.

Laura and Nick are so excited to be a part of the wonderful staff at Ascension and are excited to continue to grow Family & Faith Formations through volunteer recruitment, programmatic growth, and a focus on disciplines such as mindfulness, prayer, and celebrations of our entire liturgical calendar.

Submitted Respectfully: Laura and Nick Mielke

# Newcomers Ministry

#### Background

In May 2023, the Reverend Candice Frazer requested that I form and lead a Newcomers Committee to expand and formalize Church of the Ascension efforts to welcome, embrace, and incorporate newcomers into the life of our church.

The Committee began meeting in June and agreed on its mission, ministry framework, and action items. Program components and work undertaken by the Committee follows:

#### **Ministry Components**

Committee Members: Nelson (Chair) and Paula Smith, Ann Blackmon, Young Boozer, Paul and Jan Davis, Tina and Jim Harstad, Julia McNair,, Brittany Wade, Ed and Monique Walker, and Reverend Candice, ex-officio.

Mission: To welcome, embrace, and immerse newcomers to Church of the Ascension into the life of our church.

Newcomers Ministry Framework: This ministry involves a framework of three phases: Welcoming Phase, Embracing Phase, and Immersing Phase. Each phase has distinct elements and actions, which are flexible and can overlap phases. The purpose of this framework is to insure that our work covers the breadth of the newcomer experience from initial visit through full involvement in the mission and ministry of COA. Each phase and its associated actions and elements are addressed below.

### Welcoming Phase

Action Item Status

Bread to visitors Ongoing

Visitor Cards Ongoing

Greeters Vestry following guidelines

Improved signage Action item for 2024

**Embracing Phase** 

Action Item Status

Invitation to Breakfast Coupons for 2 Free Breakfasts

in welcome letters;;

8 o'clockers invite visitors to

breakfast

Clergy coffee/lunch Ongoing; gives welcome packet

with COA Cozy, literature, and

COA coffee mug

COA Swag COA mugs and cozies purchased

and in use

Invitation to Episco-

Parties/events

Implemented in October

Newcomers Church Tour Implemented in Nov; every third

Sunday In month

Newcomer Mentors Program in development

Welcome Packets In use; includes directory, ministry

listing, COA cozy

Church map, including

Digital map

Action item for 2024

Newcomers Bulletin Board Action item for 2024

**Immersing Phase** 

Action Item Status

Newcomer Mentors Program in development

Follow-up Contact Ongoing but needs refinement

Newcomer Involvement

In mission/ministry

Needs refinement

#### Expenses and 2024 Budget

Money spent on behalf of the Committee in 2023 included \$815 for 150 COA coffee mugs, \$627.50 for 250 COA cozies the order for both, including shipping and tax, was \$1,839.75), and \$36.00 for 100 printed breakfast coupons.

For 2024, the Committee budgeted \$14,000, including \$2,000 for replacement mugs and cozies; \$3,500 for printed 500 Welcome Folders, breakfast coupons, and stationery; \$500 for a Welcome Newcomers bulletin board/display; \$5,000 for signage; and \$3,000 for digitizing the church map on the website.

The Newcomers Ministry is a living, ongoing program at Church of the Ascension with many facets in progress or yet to be undertaken. Some of what we do today may not be useful later as we discover what works and what doesn't as we engage newcomers to our church. But the one constant, primary ingredient of our ministry remains YOU, our parishioners, who greet our newcomers, help them if they look lost, and invite them to join us in our worship and activities.

The Newcomers Committee looks forward to continuing its important work for Church of the Ascension in 2024.

Respectfully submitted, Nelson Smith Chair

### 2023 Vestry Report

When I joined our Vestry in 2021, COA was still trying to figure out a new post-pandemic normal. I am truly in awe of how our parish has pulled together and the wonderful community we have here at COA. While other churches worry about dwindling attendance and financial woes, we remain a strong, vibrant place of worship, with a congregation that extends the boundaries of our church building, thanks to our virtual presence and our outreach.

Your Vestry has had multiple areas of focus this year. There were the usual areas which we are required to do such as approving parochial reports and clergy housing allowance resolutions, passing the budgets, addressing maintenance issues, electing Diocesan Convention Delegates, and thoroughly reviewing financial reports for the church and for ADS. But then there were new projects such as the Newcomers Initiative led by Smitty Smith, Strategic Planning led by Tim Marquardt, and outdoor signage with 11 flag locations.

The Capital Campaign continued with the blessing of the new Choir space for our terrific music program and the renovated Ascension Day School (ADS) with additional space for more children and in a more secure environment for them. As we prepared to begin work on Joshua House, we discovered significant termite damage. Fortunately we have raised sufficient funds to do the repair work and to make some of the upgrades we planned. Look for the next phase of work to begin this winter so we can increase our outreach through more use of Joshua House. The Vestry has carefully monitored expenses and income to insure we get the most out of your generous pledges.

The Stewardship Campaign led by Philip Sellers and Christine Harrison successfully reached out to our congregation, resulting in increased pledges of money and involvement.

COA remains deeply committed to Outreach in its many forms through the donation of our monies, facilities, and volunteers. We gave 8.5% to our Diocese as we continue to move towards the recommended 10% Diocesan Covenant. Additional Outreach examples include Clergy Discretionary Funds, New Beginnings, Food Box, Beans & Rice, Milton Lewis Christmas Project, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and ADS. A new opportunity arose in 2023 with Vestry members serving as ushers and greeters at the closing service at COA during the meeting of the Union of Black Episcopalians. The Vestry appreciates the work of the Outreach Grants Committee which screens requests for COA funding and presents recommendations to the Vestry. Every Committee request was approved this year.

ADS is thriving under the leadership of Murrey Zimmerman and Liza Simpler. The Vestry supported ADS in a number of ways through finances and volunteers. Providing oversight, the Vestry approved the revision of the ADS Bylaws to allow the school to function more efficiently and effectively.

Some of our Vestry work was not completed in 2023 but will continue into 2024. Renovation of some of our older bathrooms was approved but not yet begun. Exploring how to get more parishioners involved in Outreach began with some monthly ingatherings. Efforts for more effective communication among the parish, staff, and clergy started. An Operating Reserves Policy Task Group began its work to recommend to the Vestry policies on establishing an operating reserve for unforeseen circumstances and for new initiatives not budgeted.

It has been a year of learning and visioning for the Vestry as well. Beginning with the Vestry Retreat last winter, we have been exploring who we are - as Christians, Episcopalians, and members of COA. We have spent time discussing Missions and Ministries. We have brainstormed new initiatives. We have begun the task of establishing the roles and responsibilities of the Vestry. We spent much energy and time reading, discussing and addressing the Ministry Improvement Proposal (MIP) of August 15, 2023. We sought the advice and assistance of the Diocese of Alabama and continue to work with Canon Geoff Evans. The Diocese recommended that the Vestry create a personnel committee and a governance committee, as well as hire a consultant in conflict management and governance. The Vestry created a Consultant Task Group and took no action on the other recommendations awaiting the Consultant's work.

The Vestry met with Bishop Diocesan Glenda Curry. The Vestry approved a Letter of Agreement with Canon Scott Holcombe to be our consultant in the area of system conflict. The Diocese is also a partner in this Agreement. The Rector and the Vestry together are moving forward, not only to ensure the future of this parish, but to make it even better than the past. Our focus remains on serving God in healthy ways to the best of our abilities as members of the Episcopal Church of the Ascension. If we open our hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit, I have no doubt we will be blessed.

Finally, I give thanks to God for the members of this Vestry for their unquestioned love of this place; the staff members who work with us tirelessly to provide the skills we need to make things happen; our clergy who teach us in so many ways what He would have us to do; our Rector, Candice, who in her short five years with us has guided COA through the pandemic and with God's help will guide us with steadfastness through the times to come; and you the people of this special place. COA is a beloved community, and our strength is our diversity. Christ's love is present in this wonderful building, and we take this love out into the world around us, enlightened and strengthened by our church home.

I look forward to being with you, though in a different capacity, on this journey to make COA the church God would have it to be.

Faithfully,

Ellen Brooks Sr. Warden

### CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION

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