

## **Good Shepherd, Bluemont Discernment Report 2019**

When newcomers come to Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in Bluemont, Va., it's usually because they found us online or they heard about us from a parishioner. Often, they are looking for a minister to help them with a wedding, funeral, or personal difficulty. So they might be confused when there is no priest in the church.

That's why we are seeking a steady, consistent priest—someone to help set the tone for our parish and provide the personality for visitors to relate to.

When people try out a new place of worship, they might first stop in to see the church building or location, but it's a minister and congregation that will keep them coming back. Whoever accepts the role of priest at Good Shepherd will have a huge influence on the way in which our congregation grows.

Good Shepherd Church, est. 1910, is a small, charming country church nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains close to the border of Loudoun and Clarke counties. The simple sweet sanctuary provides a true sense of peace and comfort for anyone who enters. Worship is at the heart of our faith-based community.

We have about 15 regularly attending parishioners, with another 10 who come out for special occasions. Visiting friends and family can raise our numbers to 30 or 40. A recent funeral brought 120 mourners. Our church can comfortably sit 75 to 80 parishioners in the sanctuary and we can squeeze in 100. Overflow seating for another 30 is available in our adjoining fellowship hall.

Good Shepherd historically drew mainly from its core Pine Grove community, but now also reaches into nearby Purcellville, Round Hill, Berryville, Bluemont, and Shenandoah Retreat. With only 15 regular attendees, most everyone participates or directly supports the worship services. As one parishioner stated, you do not have to stand in line to get a chance to serve at Good Shepherd. Many members help by reading or preaching, performing music, serving as lay Eucharistic ministers, producing our weekly bulletin, decorating the church for special occasions, updating our website and social media, writing grants for our improvement projects, organizing community events, or sharing food and drinks for our coffee hour.

For Sunday worship, we typically celebrate Holy Eucharist on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Sundays of the month and lay-led Morning Prayer on the other Sundays. For 5<sup>th</sup> Sundays we hold a variety of special services. We are happy with this schedule of worship, but may modify it based on our supply priest's availability and the calendar occurrence of festival days.

Though any week at Good Shepherd could invite musical performances on piano/organ, clarinet, flute, guitar, and an array of talented voices, Morning Prayer especially encourages our parishioners to lend their talents to preaching, leading worship, and sharing with each other. Good Shepherd's "open mike" policy allows guest speakers within or outside the congregation the chance to experiment, learn, and teach in the context of the Episcopal liturgy.

The values of our faith-based community are evident at every service. Most important is our signature Good Shepherd Passing of the Peace, when all parishioners leave their pew

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and pass the peace in the form of handshakes and/or hugs to all other parishioners. It can be a little overwhelming to visitors; but it establishes a warm, one-to-one relationship for everyone in the congregation.

Music is also of great importance to worship services at Good Shepherd. Our church provides a space that is excellent for singing God's praises. The small, open space has high ceilings that allow everyone to sound good, and parishioners enjoy singing and chanting whenever possible. Visitors sometimes remark on how so few people can fill the church with such joyous music. As a result, we've been encouraged to stretch our talents musically and try out new forms of praise, such as through soloists, percussive accompaniment, and original music. Outside groups also use the Good Shepherd sanctuary to showcase their musical gifts, providing exposure for the church and encouraging interest in our congregation.

Worship at Good Shepherd expands beyond standard Sunday worship. The church year begins with our perennial favorite Lessons and Carols services during Advent and Christmas. During Lent, we meet on Wednesday evenings for "Dinner and a Movie" followed by Compline. On Maundy Thursday we gather in the sanctuary for a Seder supper and foot washing, and on Good Friday we walk along our outside Stations of the Cross path, built through the surrounding woods by a local Boy Scout troop. As we are able, we hold Sunday morning Bible Study before church. In an exciting recent expansion of the use of our church, we have been renting our space to a Celtic Orthodox congregation that has gathered here for worship on Saturday afternoons since mid-2017.

Outreach to our community, and beyond, is important to our congregation. Our space is used weekly on Saturday nights by a local Alcoholics Anonymous chapter. We host a free community harvest dinner near Thanksgiving and are planning a summertime fundraising dinner/picnic for this coming June, 2019. We have participated in the Bluemont Fair, have raised funds for our church and other organizations through area bake sales, packaged Christmas boxes to send to children overseas, collected school supplies to send to children in Afghanistan, and sent an organ, choir robes, and other church supplies to a sister Episcopal church in Liberia. Our parishioners have joined other diocesan churches at the Shrine Mont Work Retreat in Basye, Va., and twice a year we help coordinate a service at historic Wickliffe Church in Clarke County with congregants from Grace Episcopal Church in Berryville.

Our biggest yearly service project continues to be our monthly food collection for our area food bank, FISH of Clarke County. We often exceed 100 pounds of food donations to FISH each month and occasionally raise additional funding in support of this ministry.

Though more than 100 years old, we pride ourselves on being a mission church, and we strive for new and greater ways to reach out to our community. But competition with other, larger churches in the region continues to strain our numbers, particularly in families looking for a church with a children's program. We have much to offer parishioners who choose to worship with us; but attracting them to our church is a challenge only eclipsed by keeping them coming back when we cannot offer them a consistent, devoted rector.

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We would also like to see Good Shepherd's chapel become a more frequent destination for small, country weddings, and we invite couples to celebrate their union at our sanctuary before traveling to other, larger area venues for their wedding reception.

The recent revival of our church has only been possible through the commitment and leadership of the Diocese of Virginia. The Diocese has provided part-time vicars, supply priests, and liaisons to support our congregation. Unfortunately, our location on a mountain in rural Virginia provides challenges for clerical support, and without significant growth in our numbers we can only provide little in the way of monetary compensation. This has left much of the responsibility for nurturing the spiritual life of the church to our parishioners.

Congregational growth has sparked and sputtered over the last several years. The location of the Good Shepherd in a small village between other communities has made outreach to potential members a challenge. Pine Grove has no elementary school, gas station, or grocery store to draw in people from the other villages or neighborhoods. We need to meet these challenges for the church to become financially self-sufficient.

We welcome any outside help the Diocese of Virginia could offer us.

One of Good Shepherd's gifts has been its ability to allow those who want to practice preaching to provide the homilies for Morning Prayer. For this to continue and grow, the invitation for preaching must be extended to seminarians and deacons, those in discernment, or those who have been lifted up as missionaries to small churches. The diocese can be a great help in promoting Good Shepherd as a destination for those who would like the preaching experience.

Of course, having a priest who encourages and nurtures those who preach at Good Shepherd would be a blessing for everyone.

Since we're sure we aren't alone in this effort, we ask the Diocese to identify and bring together regional small churches who could learn from each other, share resources, and most importantly study together to identify techniques, structures, and goals to bring these small congregations to a self-sustaining position. Good Shepherd would be glad to host workshops, meetings, or events relating to small church development, sermon writing techniques, or other topics that will help churches grow.

This is an opportunity for the Diocese to determine what it expects from its small mission churches and how it can help them meet these expectations.

The tenacity of the Good Shepherd congregation through the years has demonstrated its ability to work, change, and adapt to maintain an open door for those who want to be with God in our community. Our front door is always open, and the front lights are always on, so those who wish can enter and spend time with God.

Our church is a flagship for God in the community, and it remains as it always has: A quiet, peaceful place for anyone to enter and be with God.