



## STATE OF THE CHURCH

2018 Reflections  
Shallowford Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John M. Semmes  
February 3, 2019

I want to begin by telling you what a privilege it is to serve here in this vibrant congregation. Together since September, we have ensured that not one particle of moss has been allowed to grow under our collective feet here and that Shallowford's deserved reputation endures as a place where all people are invited to a faithful way of life in Christ and in community. For your continued kindness to Cindy and me, and for your willingness to adapt to the inevitable change an interim period brings, I thank you. You love your church, and it shows.

Last fall we gathered in this room with David York to learn the results of the Church Assessment Tool (CAT Survey). Your answers gave us all a better idea of Shallowford's strengths and weaknesses, its emotional temperament and an overall snapshot of how you feel your church is doing in the faith business.

The results revealed a remarkably healthy church in all but one metric, about which I will comment in a moment. Eighty percent of you said you're satisfied with how things are here, and you articulated three top priorities for improvement moving forward: an evangelism strategy to grow your congregation, expanded outreach efforts, and the development of ministries to help those broken by life circumstances.

I want to lift up a few things for you about the state of your church this afternoon, not by way of numbers but by way of the heart. An interim window in a healthy church like this one is not designed as much for growth and programmatic overhaul as it is for a deepening of your connectedness and some intentional straightening up of your house as you anticipate welcoming your next installed pastor. Statistics will actually reveal a flattening or even a decline of new member incorporation, financial giving, and program involvement in 2018, but to accept those numbers as determinative of your forward trajectory would be to misread them at best and to panic over them at worst.

So with all of that said, what happened last year? Well, your beloved pastor announced last spring he would be leaving after seven great years, right about the time you were planning a 60<sup>th</sup>-Anniversary celebration, plans that suddenly would not include him. As much as we all know every ordained clergy member in the world is an interim, it is still unsettling, and even shocking to some, when a shepherd leaves his flock.

You took the news with grace and channeled your inner resolve to carry on. Making that possible, in my view, was the fact you have a strong, talented and resilient staff, all of whom owned the change at the top and rallied around each other to produce a seamless transition that would make any congregation proud.

Essential to that effort was your then-acting head of staff, Catherine Foster, to whom you have already expressed your gratitude but whom we should acknowledge again today for her capable dedication to a very daunting task.

The 60<sup>th</sup>-anniversary festivities came at a good time, I think, because it helped you to see and celebrate the bigger picture of your church and how God has steered it at every turn in the road to become the wonderful place it is today. It was a grand opportunity to thank God for help in ages past and to expect God to help you in the time to come. Anniversaries are good for that.

Throughout the year, though, it was the constants, the things you so willingly and effortlessly stepped up to do, that kept you strong. It was beautiful music from young children and adults; it was a powerfully effective youth program, and youth choir that you need to understand is in the top tier of our denomination's youth efforts; it was the caring way you managed the Food Pantry and all the other outreach efforts by which you helped those in need; it was the educational opportunities you offered; it was the fellowship and faith building you enjoyed on this campus and in homes and at retreats like the one in October at Callaway Gardens; it was the countless ways you volunteered here for the greater whole and used your committees to manage the mundane but important details of running a church.

It was your elders meeting regularly and the decision by seven special people to sacrifice many months of their personal lives to seek a new pastor; it was your flower ministry; it was your women's circles and men's breakfasts and care ministers; it was your school; it was your support groups; it was your warm greeting to the stranger; it was your hug for the loneliest near you; it was your home-cooked meals for the sickest in your midst; it was your deep compassion for the families of so many last year who died among you; it was guest clergy, as well as your own, bringing the word week after week after week; it was your love for each other that sustained you 24/7/365. On any given ordinary day in 2018, you were the hands and feet of Christ just trying to live out the Golden Rule.

That was your year. From the outside looking in, that was how you were so patently, beautifully, uniquely Shallowford. In the words of the inimitable Robby Carroll, "Hallelujah!"

So what now? Another gifted children's educator is needed to continue the important process of planning and executing faith development for the littlest Presbyterians among us. Our mission efforts locally and elsewhere remain in constant need of more hands on the ground. Across the country, Wednesday night programming has fallen on hard times; need to re-imagine what that long-running tradition should look like here at Shallowford. Keeping our facilities in top shape is an ongoing challenge that requires our undivided attention every day. Our staff all have full plates; keeping them refreshed and renewed is a concern of mine so that "burnout" never becomes part of our lexicon in the office. There's a youth concert tour to plan and elections to hold and an ordination to happen, and Holy Week is looming on the horizon. There is all that, and so much more, to anticipate.

But let me lift up three other things to tackle in 2019. First, make your church a priority, especially in this season of awaiting word from your Pastor Nominating Committee. Your regular participation in worship, education, mission, fellowship, and financial support is the high-octane fuel that runs your well-tuned engine here at Shallowford. Even as you expect a God to bring someone for the next chapter of leadership here (which you should!), that process takes time and requires patience and trust in the group you've elected to do the work.

So while you wait, get involved! All of our committees need new blood for the tasks with which they've been charged. Without them, the work of the church falls apart. Bring your time and talent to the table, collaborate with the staff and other members to achieve objectives and get to know one another better in the process. You are only as strong as your weakest link, so to serve and enjoy Christ's church, not for what it gives you, but for what you give it, will speak volumes to the person considering a call to be your next pastor.

Secondly, pray without ceasing for your church and its leaders. In the coming months, the Session will not only determine the future scope of Shallowford Presbyterian School but also will likely have to decide whether to invest in expanding the footprint of your campus. As many of you know, the possibility exists for the purchase of adjoining real estate and a task force is in place to study the pros and cons of such a prospect. The outcome of the Session's deliberations in this regard will arguably be among the most important in the history of Shallowford Presbyterian Church and has the potential to secure your future in a way nothing else can.

In addition, your pastoral staff covets your prayers for the rewarding but challenging work of ministry here. Your program and support staffs do their work joyfully, but they need your prayers to do it well and with energy. Each week, a prayer list is generated containing the names of your fellow members and their families who all seek your petitions on their behalf. The world in which we live bends each day under the weight of a thousand, thousand problems that move us to pray. Prayer is nothing more - and nothing less - than a conversation with God, so have that conversation any way you see fit. Simply put, prayer is our best hope for tomorrow and is essential to any life of faith.

Finally, a word about spirituality, the one subject the CAT survey revealed may be our Achilles' heel here at Shallowford. A church can have all the programs and all the property and all the people it ever wanted, but if it isn't spiritually mature, it will never achieve its maximum potential. Just as you do at the gym, start low and slow. Come to worship each Sunday. Join a Sunday School class. Find a good Bible to read, along with a daily devotional that's easy to ingest. Then, grow from there. Find or start a small group to wrestle with the hard questions of faith. Work on the aforementioned prayer life we know to be so important by making prayer a scheduled part of your day. Read, read, read! There is no shortage of books and other literature that can feed even the most inexperienced Christians. Observe a Sabbath, and the rest that comes with it, whether it's on Sunday or some other day of the week. Take time for silence and self-care free of the world's distractions. If you're a writer, try journaling as a means of making the journey of faith more meaningful. Meditate if you like, using a labyrinth or some other means of staying focused. With gratitude, give back in a way that helps others. The possibilities are endless.

I mention all these things because they are the backbone of a strong congregation. And in Shallowford's case, I believe it is the one thing that, when accomplished, will make you complete.

To deepen your spiritual roots is always challenging; you can't physically see the results of your hard work. But you can know the results in your relationships with each other and those outside the bounds of our campus here. Our children, right out of the gate, need to know there are tools to help them know and love God better. Our youth need to be well versed in the practices that will support them as they navigate a new world beyond high school. And we as adults must strive to become more spiritually mature for no other reason than we are called to do it. It will change your purpose. It will change your life.

The state of this church today is solid. You are mostly healthy and happy and whole. This season of transition is no time, though, to stop moving into a future of God's unfolding. As William Shedd once said, "A ship is safe in harbor, but that's not what ships are for."

Let us resolve then, not to remain anchored until a new pastor arrives. Let us determine instead to set sail on the high seas. That's where God wants us, and that's where all the best adventures await. May God bless our journey. May God bless this church. May God bless us all the way home.