



# Christmas Reflection 2017

The Rt. Rev. Herman Hollerith, IV  
*Bishop of Southern Virginia*

Just a few weeks ago I had the pleasure of making a Sunday visitation to St. Paul's Church in Newport News. For those who have never visited the church building, St. Paul's is situated in the remains of what once was a grand downtown neighborhood in the center of the city. All that remains in that neighborhood now are municipal government buildings, a few businesses, structures belonging to the Newport News shipyard, and bits and pieces of low income housing. There is no longer any true neighborhood there like most of our parishes enjoy. In a real sense, St. Paul's is a parish in an urban wasteland.

And yet, the membership of St. Paul's is very clear about their parish's role in the community – why they are there and what they believe God is calling them to do. While a portion of the congregation is made up of dedicated people who live in more desirable parts of town, the largest portion is comprised of people who are homeless, or very near homeless.

During my visit I was asked to lead a bible study and hold a general discussion with the community. Most who gathered for the conversation had come both to talk and to receive the free breakfast served after the class. For some the meal would be their only meal of the day – possibly the best of the week.

Needless to say, leading an adult class made up predominately of street people is not at all like leading any other adult class in our diocese. The attendees are not the least bit interested in talking about the diocesan budget, Talbot Hall, the bishop's vision for congregational development, or this summer's General Convention. In our discussion, other than some interesting initial questions about why bishops wear "pointy hats" (a question for which, I must confess, I did not have an adequate answer), the real topic of interest was the shooting in the Baptist church in Texas. It was clear that although the news was a few weeks old, many in attendance were still struggling to understand the tragedy. After several minutes of conversation, I became deeply impressed by the level of passion being expressed. People were genuinely perplexed and outraged that such a thing could ever happen in a church. And they wanted to talk about it!

But, it wasn't until later that afternoon while driving home that I figured out the meaning of what I had witnessed during the class. I had not witnessed an abstracted intellectual discussion on the need for gun control, or on politics, or on the psychology or sociology of mass murder. Rather, I had witnessed the passionate concerns of those who literally depend on their church to be their "safe space," their sanctuary, from the dangers of the world. The people of St. Paul's – at least those who are its street clientele – attend church to escape the day-to-day violence of the streets. Church is where they go to *escape* being shot. The notion that church could be otherwise invokes in those challenged people a sense of injustice and a level of anxiety that most of us fortunate types will never comprehend.

I am not at all sure what it means to live in a world where innocent people are murdered in church. I don't know how to live with that reality yet. But, I do know – have been reminded by the good people of St. Paul's – the incredible power of grace that the Church conveys when it takes the risk of offering itself to the world as a true sanctuary of God. The Church is always at its best when it seeks to find ways of *un-protecting* itself, of being more vulnerable and more risk-taking. And its witness to the love of God is never as powerful as when it opens its doors to the world when all other doors are shut and locked down on Main Street. After all, such action is our way of saying to those suffering, or fearful, or in need, that there *is* room in the inn, by God! There *is* room in the inn!

Note: Many of our churches in Southern Virginia are actively engaged in various forms of ministry to the homeless. I hope all of us will find some way to both financially and physically support the unique ministry of St. Paul's, Newport News, as well as our local ministries during the holiday season and throughout the coming year.

Merry Christmas,  
+Holly