



The Reverend Anne Kirchmier

By

Melissa Sale



The St. Andrew's Staff at Team Building Day in 2018 (L-R) Brad Norris, Matthew Williamson, Bill Boyer, Bill Wilds, Carol Chamberlin, The Reverend Anne Kirchmier, Rachel Roby, The Reverend Lorna Williams

"Caring for members is only half the call. We have to care for those outside the church and to talk about who Jesus is so they can learn about God." – The Reverend Anne Kirchmier

Arriving at St. Andrew's in February 2017, The Reverend Anne Kirchmier recalled, "... I found compelling the depth and breadth of adult formation, and the outreach by the church and by individuals. I'd already had positive interactions with Rachel, Bill and Brad and knew what a great staff they were." She'd read in the parish profile that St. Andrew's congregation was looking for someone to walk with them on their journey. "I loved that – a journey." She marvels that she is only the fifth rector since St. Andrew's became an official parish in 1943. "I know it is rare for a church to have a long rectorate. It says a lot about the health and stability of a congregation. That was very appealing to me."

Not long after she arrived, Anne and her husband John Herbst invited rotating groups of parishioners to their home each week for a program called Coffee and Conversations as a way for everyone to get to know each other. "I loved that even people who knew each other said they learned something new about someone."

For the first couple of years, she saw her role as learning the place, the people, and building trust. She sought to strengthen the church's infrastructure. She realizes that these tasks are not always as noticed or as exciting, but necessary.

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Anne said, "I grew up in the church." Her dad was Presbyterian. Her mother was Episcopalian. "The rule was, everyone went to church every Sunday." She went with her mother to the weekly Episcopal Communion service. She went to Sunday school at the Presbyterian Church and was a part of their larger, more active youth group and choir. Because her family had no close relatives in the area, her special needs brother took up much of her parents' attention, and she had no living grandparents, many older people in her churches befriended her. "Church was a place where adults made time for me, a place where people cared about me. That generation of older folks didn't exist in my family."

Her calls to ministry began when she was a young person. Anne attended a Catholic High School in Pittsburgh for two years. One of her teachers asked if she was going to be minister. "That was probably my first inkling of a call." Later, at a college friend's ordination service, their friend Rod told Anne, "Someday we'll be sitting at your ordination." Anne was shocked, because she'd never spoken of any interest in ministry to her friends. Anne recalls, "The voice of God came through a very unexpected instrument."

Instead of choosing ministry, Anne followed in her family's tradition -- her mother, grandparents, and aunts were all teachers. After graduation from Westfield State College in Massachusetts, Anne became a special education teacher. For the next 11 years, she taught at Amherst, MA and at the Academy at Charlemont in Charlemont, MA. "During those years, I was discerning a call to ministry, but I didn't take it seriously. I felt I wasn't the right person to do it." Anne said. She continued worshiping at the Episcopal Church in Amherst. There, the associate rector was "incredibly accessible, good and effective as a priest, but also vulnerable." Her image of a minister had always been someone perfect and on a pedestal. Anne began to think that perhaps she too could become a priest.

In 1992, she decided to proceed with ministry and asked to be added to the list of prospective postulants from her diocese. For the next six years, in a complex set of circumstances due to her bishop's retirement, search process and required waiting for the new bishop to add her to



*The Reverend Anne Kirchmier
in her office at St. Andrew's
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the list and then that bishop's illness and death and renewed search process, her application for postulancy stayed on hold. In 1998, she entered Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, IL. She attended for two years on faith and with her own money as she had not yet been named a postulant by the Diocese of Western Massachusetts. In spite of bureaucracy, Anne didn't give up. "I felt like I was supposed to be a minister."

In 2001, she was named one of the first three Lilly Endowment Clergy Residents in the Episcopal Church and became a clergy resident at Christ Church in Alexandria, Virginia. Anne describes the program as allowing new clergy to function and participate in parish life like a medical resident for two years after seminary. For the next 11 years, Anne served in churches in Alexandria, Winchester, Doswell, and at St. George's Newport News before coming to St. Andrew's in 2017.

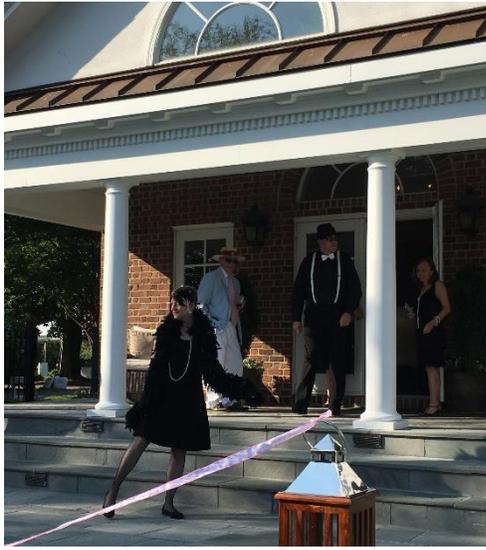
She sees her vocations as teacher and minister coalescing "in ways that I wouldn't have thought. Discernment means to sift in Latin, sorting through what's there. Gifts and skills I had as a teacher have been very helpful." A passage in the Book of Common Prayer charges ministers "to be a pastor, priest, and teacher." She wants the congregation to know why we are doing what we're doing. Preaching and teaching are related. "All those interactions with families and kids for 11 years, often when there is a problem." She'd seen troubled children and those students dealing with family problems. "I'm a better priest because I had those experiences as a teacher."

Anne sees her vocation as a minister as most rewarding. "There are so many holy and humbling moments to be with people. To walk with them, to help them have hope in that moment, to have conversations about what matters. Not that I can speak for God, but to look at scriptures and discover how challenges can be met by faith." Further, she says, "To offer God's blessing to people is so meaningful, to pray with people and come into their lives." She doesn't have the answers, but she appreciates being able to ask questions and to work with questions people have. "A broken world needs a lot of blessing." In all of the trials and problems of life, she believes there is hope. "Hope is that God is here and you will see glimpses of God in moments of comfort, of God working in that moment."

So far, the hardest thing Anne has experienced here was the closing of St. Andrew's Episcopal School in 2018. "To go through that decision was hard, but I do think God is at work." She saw the discernment as a tough, but necessary process – to talk, to pray about it. She notes that already five to six new groups are in the building. It is a process to "figure where new life is and how God might be leading us in new ways. It's exciting."

This year's 100th Anniversary events have been most memorable to Anne. "It's so exciting and such a privilege to be in a church celebrating its 100th Anniversary. Hilton is so unique. There are so many long-time members and residents." The celebrations are especially meaningful. "I'm glad we've done a variety of things like the 1892 Prayer Book worship. Here's the life of this place over all of this time. It reminds us of what a firm foundation is here." She particularly

enjoyed the St. Andrew's Garden Party. "A diversity of talents tapped into, all the people together."



Rev. Anne Kirchmier in 1920s Costume at the St. Andrew's Garden Party May 2019

She enjoys "the privilege of being able to worship together. I'm grateful for the faithful and diligent Vestry. The weekly meetings I have with the wardens are helpful." She loves the Halloween Outreach and the flexibility of worship during Newport News's One City Marathon, when we can meet in the parish hall.

How effective is the church today? "We recognize that we don't have a choice about doing things differently. We pay attention to what is happening around us. We're thankful for what we have as is. Continue growing members' faith, but be mindful that many people won't come into the doors of St. Andrew's or other churches, but are still part of God's plan." She wants to focus on helping people connect with God in ways that work with them. "It's challenging, but exciting," she said. She

remembers that God came to earth without the church structure and sees "that can help us better navigate these times."

She sees her role in today's Post-Christendom world as "Looking clear-eyed at the situation as it actually is, not as it used to be." She was encouraged and excited that over 40 people attended the Sunday school discussions based on the book *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. "It gives me hope for the future, that people are interested." She sees that it is crucial to "step back enough to ask good questions – like what is our mission. We have to ask hard questions in order to get answers."

In spite of changes in attitude and society, Anne said that the need to work with souls hasn't changed. "Throughout the last 100 years, some things have remained the same, such as being pastorally present, reminding people that God is always with them." Her vision for St. Andrew's future is "less a specific program or plan, than continuing to move forward with engagement with the community, reaching outside ourselves, and collaborating with others."



The Reverend Anne Kirchmier and her husband, The Reverend John Herbst in 2018