

THE LOWER YELLOWSTONE CLUSTER
CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION AND EMMANUEL EPISCOPAL CHURCH

PRIEST-IN-CHARGE'S SPECIAL REPORT FOR 2017

Before I begin, let us remember the words of the apostle Paul as he wrote in his first letter to church in Corinth as he encouraged them to be supportive of one another:

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. *1 Corinthians 12:14-20 NRSV*

There has been growth in both of our congregations over the past year or so – new members and more active participation from other members. We have also begun to implement an exciting new outreach ministry at both churches through the "Little Free Pantry" program. This is an essential way for us to serve our communities and continue to live out the call from Jesus to love God and to love our neighbor.

Now, our churches face a key point in our lives as worshipping communities. We face two key changes in the way that we have operated for a number of years. These changes had been anticipated for a number of years, but we must now make some decisions.

First, the reserve funds that Emmanuel has been relying on for many years to help cover operating expenses has or will have been depleted quite soon. Secondly, the funds that the diocese has been providing to help defray the cost of having a clergy person will be exhausted at the end of 2017. As we knew from the beginning, the source of this funding is finite and would run out.

The question that we face now is how much do we value our church community and what are we willing to do to not only continue our work and worship, but to grow and thrive. We must decide if we are willing to do what it takes to continue as worshipping communities in partnership who seek to serve Christ in all people in Eastern Montana or if we should close.

If we are to continue to operate, then some things must change. Given the end of financial assistance from the diocese, there is a need for increased support from both congregations. Additionally, Emmanuel's reserve funds have been or will be depleted shortly. This means that Emmanuel will need support from Ascension to continue to operate. I believe that we are part of the same body of Christ and are called to support one another.

Assuming that the will of the vestries is that we should continue to operate, I have created draft budgets for each congregation based on the current budgets. I simply updated the numbers to reflect no further direct diocesan support and a lack of reserve funds at Emmanuel. These are drafts simply based on those two changes.

The churches of the Lower Yellowstone Cluster serve a vital role in our communities and in Eastern Montana. We are the Episcopal Church of Eastern Montana. We have an important voice and role in Eastern Montana. We provide liturgical and sacramental worship with an open heart and open arms. We should do what we can to continue worshiping and serving our communities; however, it is also important to remember that this isn't about paying to have a priest. The question we are faced with is, what does it mean to be an Episcopalian today in Eastern Montana?

I ask that we all prayerfully consider our commitment and our sense of call to be a community of faith in Eastern Montana.

Respectfully submitted,
Father Stephen C. Day