



*Office of The Bishop
The Rt. Rev. Gary R. Lillibridge*

***The Episcopal Diocese
of West Texas
The Bishop Jones Center***

March 31, 2010

Dear Friends,

I am writing to you regarding the suggestion that St. Michael's Episcopal Church and Holy Spirit Episcopal Church explore the possibility that God may be calling you together as one congregation, united in common mission. Many, but perhaps not all, of you are aware that some conversation has been occurring over the past two months about this possibility. To formally begin this process of mutual conversation, this letter is being sent to both congregations as you seek to live into Christ's command to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (The Great Commission, Matthew 28.19-20). As a Church, God's mission in the world is our thesis.

About two years ago I was in conversation with Holy Spirit about their future and their potential property sale (which has now been finalized), including whether or not they would move westward on 1604 from their site across from the UTSA campus. I asked Holy Spirit to look west of their present location (at UTSA) as we were also beginning a congregation on Camp Bullis Road near TMI. As we discussed this, I mentioned that a conversation with St. Michael's would be appropriate if it was determined that a westward move would occur. As it happens, Holy Spirit has now put an offer on a tract of land of a little over ten acres near the corner of 1604 and Bandera Road.

On January 3 of this year, I made my annual Sunday visitation to St. Michael's. As the possibility of Holy Spirit's land purchase grew more likely, I asked those present at St. Michael's that morning about entering a conversation with Holy Spirit about a merger of the two congregations. Let me outline some of the reasons to even consider the possibility:

1. By joining together in common mission, you will combine the God-given assets of both congregations in Northwest San Antonio, the fastest growing area of our city.
2. During the last several years, from time to time parishioners from St. Michael's have inquired about a long term plan for the congregation.
3. The seeds for common mission have already been planted in several ministry areas between the two congregations. The two youth ministries already meet jointly. The "over 55 crowd" has had several dinners together as part of a youth ministry "thank you." In the past, St. Michael's has also invited the vicar of Holy Spirit to lead a Bishop's

Committee retreat. I am sure that there are other combined ministry events that you are aware of that I do not know about. In light of these things, it seems that the two congregations already have a good and growing relationship.

4. Holy Spirit has a considerable amount of the financial resources needed (thanks to the sale of their previous property) to purchase and build a new church. The Diocese does not have the financial resources to help St. Michael's do the same. However, by having this conversation now, St. Michael's can participate in the planning and development of a new place of worship from which both congregations can go out into the world together as one, in common mission.
5. One congregation has the potential to be stronger and more viable than two separate ones. Certainly a merger would provide a stronger and larger critical mass of resources of all kinds that would enable people to live more fully into the Great Commission.
6. In considering what it means to "be the Church" in the 21st century, we need to be able to think creative thoughts so that our efforts can indeed bear much fruit for God's Kingdom.
7. You are not alone! We are having conversations with other congregations about mergers, the viability of some of our locations, and what we are called to be and do in our communities. The conversation between Holy Spirit and St. Michael's is very timely in this regard.

To facilitate these conversations, I have asked The Rev. Ed Dohoney from my office to assist all of you in your conversations. He has been working closely with The Rev. Jason Roberts as we have moved into these discussions. Each congregation currently has an appointed task force looking at the merger from each congregation's perspective (and I hope from a combined perspective as well as your conversation moves along).

I ask that a congregational meeting be held after Easter in each location to begin congregational reflection. The two task forces will determine, in conjunction with Ed, Jason, and your Bishop's Committees when to have these meetings. Following each congregational meeting, each household will receive a brief survey seeking your input regarding a merger; including your thoughts about strengths/weaknesses/hopes/anxieties/what might have to be given up/what might be taken on/ and so forth.

In all of this, I am calling on you to consider the biggest possible picture in what God may be doing in your life together and also to see how your ministries would be strengthened should both congregations decide that you are called to a common mission in the world.

It is an exciting and challenging time to be a Christian, and I am hopeful for our future as we seek to serve Christ in all that we do. This comes with my gratitude for your service and ministry in Christ's Church, and I will hold you in my prayers in the weeks and months ahead.

Faithfully,

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Gary R. Lillibridge
Bishop of West Texas