ANNUAL REPORT

For

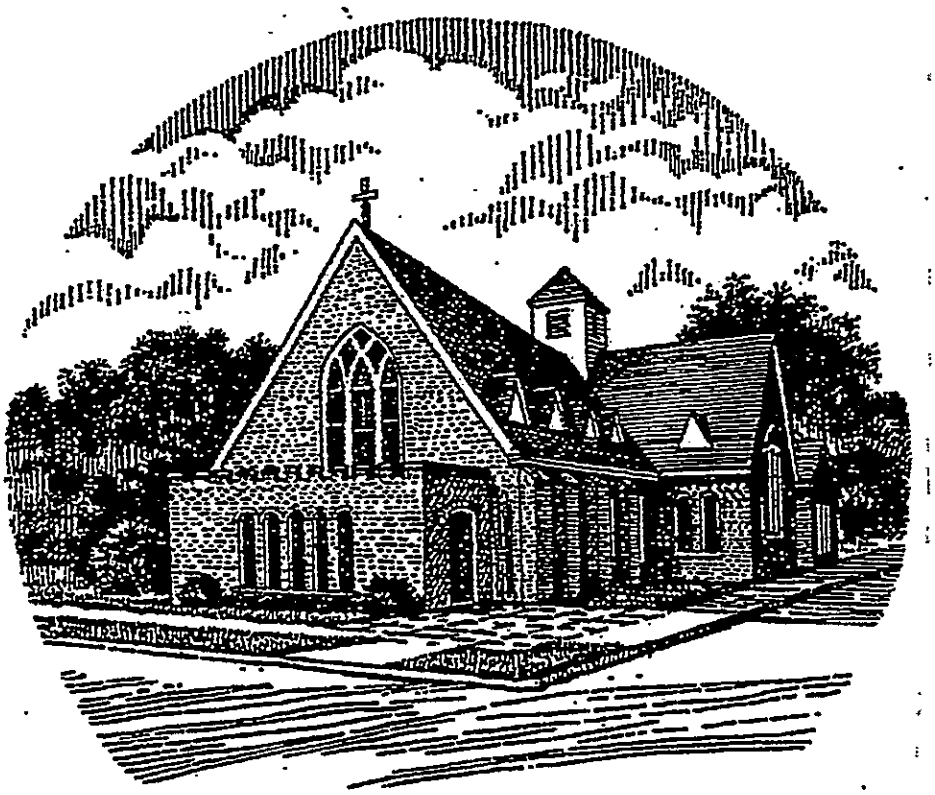
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church

Sunbury, Pennsylvania

January 18th, 2026

The Reverend Dina Carter Ishler

Rector



St. Matthew's Annual Meeting

January 18th, 2026

AGENDA

A. Opening Prayer and Welcome- Mother Dina

B. Senior Warden Annual Meeting Report (also included in packet)

C. Finance Report - Tom Culver, Treasurer

D. All reports from our ministries are included in this packet. Any additions or comments on any of these reports?

E. Election of Vestry Members & Delegates to Diocesan Convention

   1. The Appointment of Tellers

F. The Results of the Election Committee

G. Adjournment and Closing Prayer- Mother Dina

SENIOR WARDEN'S REPORT – FRAN ZARTMAN

We began last year, 2025, with a challenge- the failure of our steam boiler. Well, as you might guess it's nearly impossible to replace a heating system of this size in the middle of a Pennsylvania winter- and we also wanted to discern what kind of heat would be best for us in this season. So, we prayed over the boiler, splashed it with some holy water, filled in the cracks with marine epoxy and then continued to pray for the coming of spring.

After discussions with the vestry and conversations with multiple HVAC contractors, we decided to replace the steam boiler with a hot water heating system. Converting the existing radiators to hot water is a more efficient type of warm heat, much cleaner, appropriate for our historic building, and less expensive to maintain and operate. The decision to convert to hot water raised the price tag significantly, but the savings on efficiency with the heating bills and a better, warmer heat became a decision we were comfortable making. We are expecting to see lower natural gas consumption and less maintenance on this system as additional benefits!

The process for replacing the furnace and adapting the existing steam radiators to hot water was a process that lasted into early fall, and we also discovered there were a few radiators that hung on the wall of the nave that needed completely replaced as they could not be converted. Believe it or not just two sections of these radiators cost and additional $22,000. Ouch! The challenge of paying for this heating system upgrade was a daunting task, and while the funding was being pursued we continued to pray.

This has been a hard year in the loss of so many of dear St Matthew's family members. We have worshipped with them and fellowshipped with them and, finally, buried them- people we profoundly love. Joe Metz was one of them. Joe and his wife, Cheryl, who grew up in the St Matthew's community, loved St Matthews and our family of faith dearly. 10+ years ago with the support and professional advice of Chuck Schlegel they decided to gift their home to St Matthew's after they both died. Cheryl died in 2016, and then Joe in June of this year. Their benevolent, radically generous gift to our community had become, in this season, a monumental 'God moment' for St Matthew's and her future.

Having received this amazing and timely gift, we began the sale process. We could immediately tell that there was more value in that home than the original market estimate- it had great bones and was very low maintenance, with many upgrades in recent years.

St Matthew's showed up in force with our trademark 'can do' spirit and a genuine desire to maximize the blessing of this home. In one month's time we cleaned out the entire contents, scrubbed inside and out, replaced sidewalks and stairs, restored beauty to the yard, painted the porch and staged it with fall flowers and furniture. Because of the efforts of many, we sold this home for $120,000- and then had an estate sale and raised $3,500 more with the sale of some contents of the house. We saved numerous articles and gifted them to Haven Ministries,

for folks starting out with nothing; gave the VA some WW2 items, and donated multiple loads of clothing and other items to Community Aid stores, Salvation Army, etc.

The generosity of this gift touched our entire community.

We at St. Matthew's have so much to be thankful for! We have a beautiful and now newly-warm place to worship. We have legacy people whose generosity and love will help carry her into her future. I can only pray that one day I can do something as beautiful as that of Cheryl and Joe. May God's blessings continue to be upon us and may He guide us into a future of faith and love- continuing to do the works He presents to us as we walk in His calling and light.

DISCERNMENT JOURNEY REFLECTIONS~ DAVID HOLLABAUGH

My journey of discernment has been defined by seasons of clarity and seasons of struggle—by moments when God's presence feels close and moments when it seems hidden behind silence. It has not unfolded in a straight line. More often it has moved like a tide, advancing with confidence and purpose at times, then pulling back into uncertainty, questions, and vulnerability. Yet even that movement has become part of the gift of this journey. I am learning that formation is not simply about becoming more skilled or more certain; it is about becoming more truthful before God. It is not only the accumulation of knowledge gained at Stevenson (seminary), but a slow and steady surrender to transformation and embracing what Mother Dina often states – that we are all beloved, and it is hard being human. I am so thankful to the members of my discernment committee for sharing such holy conversations with me.

Living in community at St Matthew's has been one of the most essential and shaping elements of this journey. Day by day, community life with you has formed me in ways I could not have planned and, at times, in ways I would not have chosen. It has brought forward both the gifts God has planted in me and the places that still need healing. It is teaching me patience, humility, and accountability. It has invited me to be known, to listen, to forgive, and to begin again when my own shadows surface. I have come to see that Christian formation cannot be lived in isolation, as this parish's example shows. The ordinary rhythms of our shared life—prayer, Compline, diaper pantry, food bank ministry, ordinary conversation, chores like polishing the brass, laughter, tensions, disappointments, support, and reconciliation—are not distractions from formation; they are formation. In the life of St Matthew's, my very heart is tested and softened, and I am continually reminded that ministry begins with learning how to love you as my neighbor.

There are days when the call to ordained ministry feels steady and life-giving, as if it carries me forward with peace. But there are other days when I feel the weight of weakness—when prayer feels dry, when study feels heavy, and when doubt tries to convince me that I am not enough. These are the moments I wish more people would check in on me. Discernment can be a difficult season precisely because it reaches deep into the soul. It asks not only theological questions, but personal ones: Who am I becoming? What must be surrendered? What needs

to be purified? What needs to be healed? This is the refining work of God, and refinement is never comfortable, and sometimes it feels like a consuming fire. I have learned that doubt is not always the enemy of my faith; sometimes it is the labor of faith being strengthened. And weakness is not a sign of failure—it can become the very place where grace takes root and grows. I am thankful for your grace.

In the midst of these challenges, serving at the altar as a Eucharistic minister has been profoundly life-giving. The altar has become a steady ground when everything else feels uncertain. There, within the reverence and simplicity of the liturgy, my vocation is renewed and strengthened. Serving the Eucharist is not merely a task; it has become an echo of God's call within me—a holy reinforcement of the quiet invitation that first led me toward discernment. It is my oxygen. Each time I stand near the sacred mysteries, each time I assist in offering Christ's Body and Blood to God's people, I am reminded that my vocation is not built on achievement, perfection, or self-confidence or self-worth. It is rooted in presence – our shared presence with Christ. Christ gives himself again and again, and in that continual gift I find my own "yes" being renewed and fed: to serve, to shepherd, to love, and to offer my life for the building up of the Church is my statement of call. I claim this language as authentically my own.

Ultimately, this journey is forming me not only into a future priest, but into a more faithful disciple. The tensions, the community of St Matthew's, the struggles, the doubts, the altar, and the moments of deep peace are all part of God's work in me. Discernment is shaping me, but even more than that, it is transforming me. God is meeting me in the spaces between weakness and calling, and teaching me that vocation is not the absence of fear or uncertainty—but it is the courage to keep saying yes, even while I am still becoming what God has always created me to be – beloved. So in closing, please hold me just a bit closure as we walk together in love, as one Body, the Church.

LIVE STREAM - 2026

The St. Matthew's live stream has been up and running continually since Palm Sunday, 2024. We are so grateful for our ECW who purchased top of the line equipment for us, which helps us offer quality video and sound, and for everyone who helped us install it back in 2024. Our services are available in real time on our YouTube channel (@St.MatthewsEpiscopalChurchSunb) and Facebook live, and then remain available on YouTube for people to watch at any time. Some upgrades that have been added are a choir microphone, two hand-held wireless microphones and a new lectern microphone.

This way of worshipping is never intended to permanently replace in-person worship, especially in receiving the Holy Eucharist, but is a tremendous blessing to folks who are not physically able to come to church. A huge thank you to Carter Ishler for his weekly, unwavering leadership in this extremely important ministry of the Church.

ECW Report 2026

January 18, 2026

News from the ECW 2025 - (Episcopal Church Women)

As I write this, I have many wonderings....what does ECW mean these days, how can we involve others, what is our mission in our parish, do we need to restructure what is currently working... Keeping this in mind I can't imagine us trying to do more or even continue what we do if we can't get more help as we are aging, and I don't know about you but, I need days to recover after doing any of our events! The year past was very full of activities that ECW either created or were asked to do, like meals for 5 of 6 funerals this year, what will this year bring?

The fun-raising(per Fran) that we do always has some project in mind, that sometimes gets derailed when something more vital hits the church, as the ancient heating system. Our goal currently is to get the parking lot resurfaced as it is way past its life span, who knew they have an expiration date. That figure is coming in at around $25,000 that we have managed to raise, so look for this in the spring!

We tithe to our ministries unless it is already designated to a ministry, Cole Alan Diaper Pantry, Boy Scout Troops 309 & 3309; fun fact, St Matthews had one of the first scout troops in Sunbury; His Disciples Food Pantry and the Rectors Discretionary Fund.

Purchases this year were 2 newer air conditioners for parish hall, new work tables in the kitchen(many visitors comment on how well equipped/stocked our kitchen is),a battery operated lawn mower and many supplies to keep our church stocked to operate our fundraisers.

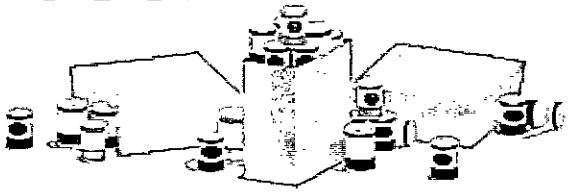
We had some different functions this year, Pampered Chef party and wreath decorating, both enjoyed by many who don't attend this church! It makes my heart glad to welcome residents from our area to this beautiful historic building with the hopes that should they be searching for a place of worship they remember our welcoming space.

We are having an indoor yard sale again with our scout troops so as you clear out closets and cupboards to make space for all your Christmas treasures bring the purged to church and we will see it gets to the place we stash items for this event.

Watch the calendar for our future events; invite your family, friends andneighbors to share in our warmth and faith..... And we are a fun time no matter what we are doing!!!

Your fearless(fearfull) leader of the pack!

FOOD PANTRY



HIS DISCIPLES FOOD PANTRY - 2026

Thanks to a number of volunteers, and the generosity of our church family, our food pantry has been able to provide food to an average of forty five to sixty families on a monthly basis. We also receive donations of food and funds from various members of the community as well. Food is available on the last Saturday of every month and, at times, we provide food on an emergency basis when requested by some of the area agencies. Food is distributed at the church and consists of non-perishable items. Items distributed varies depending on funds available and cost of items we purchase.

Please be assured that all who volunteer to help and all those who receive food appreciate the continued support, both financial and prayer, of the pantry.
Respectfully Submitted
His Disciples Food Pantry

Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania Convention report – Fall 2025
Attended By: Martha Bohner and David Hollabaugh

The 2025 Diocesan Convention was held October 17–18 as a joint convention of the Dioceses of Bethlehem and Central Pennsylvania. This historic gathering completed the work of reunifying the two dioceses into the Episcopal Diocese of the Susquehanna, which officially began January 1, 2026.

The convention included worship, presentations from youth and young adults, and addresses by Bishops Audrey Scanlan and Kevin Nichols focused on unity, mission, and the future of the new diocese.

Delegates approved the Agreement and Plan of Merger, adopted the new diocese's Constitution and Canons, and passed the 2026 budget and clergy compensation schedules. Elections were held for the Diocesan Council and deputies to General Convention, and several resolutions were affirmed.

The convention marked an important step forward, emphasizing collaboration, sustainability, and shared ministry as we move together into the Diocese of the Susquehanna.
Martha Bohner

COLE ALLEN DIAPER PANTRY ANNUAL REPORT
January, 2026

Our very first Diaper Pantry was held November 2013. 12 families were served that day, distributing 42 diapers per child, about a weeks' supply.

We distribute to families on the **First Saturday of each month, 10 – 11:30am,** giving 40 diapers per baby, 20 pull-up training pants when asked, and a pack of wipes. We serve families from the Sunbury, Northumberland, Danville, Elysburg, Milton, Herndon, Lewisburg, Shamokin, and Selinsgrove, Trevorton areas. We are listed as a local resource, receive referrals from WIC, United Way, Birthright, area churches and food pantries. We share information about local resources with families and often have donated items of baby food, formula, bibs, hand-made hats and gloves to offer.

FYI: For those who receive assistance, EBT/SNAP does not allow the purchase of diapers, wipes etc. If they can't eat it, they don't get it.

- Since 2024 our numbers have been up, covering between 80 and 129 bottoms in 2025!
- Starting balance of funds: $6,211.62, received $7,091.13 = $13,302.75
  Expenses: $10,661.30, **Balance $2,641.45**
- We've received monetary donations from parishioners, The Shikellamy Education Assn, Zion Lutheran church's Mission Mall, a $1,000 grant from The Mustard Seed, $5,000 Geisinger grant, many boxes and packs of diapers/wipes from The United Way's Diaper Dash, AND <u>many donations from our church family and friends, near and far,</u>
- Our ECW fundraisers tithe to this ministry.
- Please consider coming to see us in action and help to pack, restock, meet the families
- Families are so grateful for this help – a weeks' worth of diapers & a pack of wipes.

Thank you for helping in keeping this monthly ministry alive.

Connie Kistler, Cynthia Reid, Karen Persing

The Ministry of Altar Guild - 2026

"As I handle holy things, grant that my whole life may be illuminated and blessed by You, in whose honor I prepare them, and grant that the people who shall be blessed by their use, may find their lives drawn closer to Him Whose Body and Blood is our hope and our strength, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

The Altar Guild is a ministry– a ministry of service. The members (women and men) of the Altar Guild serve the Church under the direction of the Priest and are responsible for setting up and caring for the furnishings in the nave, sanctuary and sacristy as well as any other area of the church where weekly worship may take place to also include special celebrations such as Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, weddings, baptisms and funerals. It is a "behind the scenes" ministry, but a critical act of service to the church. Preparing the altar each week for worship is a way of expressing our faith.

We have several individuals serving in the ministry of altar guild. We currently have four teams who rotate every several weeks to prepare for the weekly and other special services. We also have many committed individuals who iron all the linens (Martha Bohner), order supplies; such as communion supplies, oil for the candles, etc. (Roy Casey), order flowers for special occasions (Maryann Loftus) and many others who assist with the brass cleaning that occurs twice a year. We are blessed!

We welcome anyone who may be interested in serving in this ministry. Please contact Mitzie Kerstetter at 570-847-8629 or talk with any Altar Guild Member.

Blessings,
Mitzie Kerstetter

Teams:
Mary Hollenbach and Bill Rowe
Lynda Schlegel-Culver and Pam Schlegel
Justina Hollenbach and Dana Comfort
Nate Blanchard and Mitzie Kerstetter

MEN'S BREAKFAST CLUB

We added two extra breakfasts this season; the Sunday after Labor Day and January's first Sunday was well after the New Years Holiday. We have been feeding about 25 people on a typical Sunday (counting the kitchen crew.) The crowd will be larger here in February when we host the boy scouts and their families. Three more breakfasts on first Sundays and Mother's Day, come out and enjoy.

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CHILDREN & YOUTH MINISTRY

This year, our children and young people shared in our worship and community life services by serving as acolytes and "altar assistants", reading prayers and scripture readings, participating in the music ministry, helping out on Altar Guild, decorating the church and helping with brass cleaning, with the Saint Nicholas Festival and various church dinners with the ECW. The youth also volunteered in the much-loved community event Sunbury window painting for Christmas. It was wonderful for the children of visiting families to participate in making music, carrying banners, children's breakfast activities, and our annual Easter Egg hunt. Thank you to Anissa DeCapria-Sanduta and Justina Newton for their support and involvement as just one part of their busy, faithful lives.

One exciting aspect of this year was the birth of SEVEN babies who are connected with our community, and so we are entering a new era when the faith formation needs of toddlers/young children must be a priority for us. If you have any suggestions for ways to involve our young people in our church life, please let us know. They have so many other demands on their time and energy- many wonderful talents and accomplishments in the areas of academics, music, sports, and art- and so "thinking outside of the box" is essential. Please keep all the young people who are part of our community in your prayers, remembering that they are the ones who must carry the torch of faith and demonstrate loving, Christ-centered service in the years ahead. Thank you all for the beautifully spiritual role models you are to them!

Respectfully submitted, Anissa DeCapria-Sanduta and Mother Dina

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GREETINGS FROM THE STEWARDSHIP COMMITTEE!

A quick update from your stewardship committee

As we look ahead to stewardship in 2026, we must begin with gratitude for last year's successful campaign, and we are so incredibly grateful for your generous response. As you will see from Tom's treasurer report, we had a wonderful year, with our income well above our expenses, which is a place of tremendous blessing! When we launch 2026's stewardship campaign, it will be with our collective gaze turned towards our 200th anniversary in 2027, using this milestone to prayerfully consider both our current needs and priorities and our hopes and goals for our future. We feel so very blessed to have a faith community who has been so supportive, so dedicated to our church and our witness and mission in our community.

With gratitude and love~ Fran Zartman (senior warden) and Mother Dina+

LENT WEDNESDAYS (EVENINGS)
ADVENT TUESDAYS (EVENINGS)
ADULT EDUCATION (SUNDAY MORNING)

In 2026, we once again gathered together on Wednesday evenings during Lent and Advent. The evenings began at 6:00 PM in the social hall with a short devotional opening followed by a pot-luck style supper. At around 7:00 PM, we moved to the nave for Stations of the Cross, and ended with either Evening Prayer or Compline. During Advent, we were able to tie into David's weekly online Compline, and utilize this as the conclusion of our time together.

Adult Education typically meets the third Sunday morning of every month at 9:00 AM. At the conclusion of 2024, we selected the book of Galatians as the topic of study because it was included in the Revised Common Lectionary in 2025. Selecting a book attributed to Paul is challenging for many reasons. The scholarship on Paul is dynamic, wide in scope, often technical, and with great differences in opinions and conclusions. In addition, Paul's central and unique place and role in the New Testament canon explicitly, or implicitly, tends to cast him into many roles and affect how we think about, define, and evaluate, in the past and present, things like the structure of theology, evangelization, Christian origins, Second Temple Judaism, ancient letter writing, Roman governance, the content of 'the Gospel', ancient travel, religious experience, skepticism, rhetoric, and so on, in relation to Christianity as a movement and within our own personal, individual lives as Christians. To try and incorporate some of these challenges, before looking directly at Galatians, we talked about such topics as the authorship of the letters attributed to Paul, the sources of biographical information about Paul (utilizing Acts and/or the letters) and their implications for Paul and early Christianity, whether Paul was converted or called, what 'apostle to the Gentiles' might mean for interpreting the content of his writings and who he was interacting with, and how Second Temple, Reformation, and modern interpretations of Paul and his language and concepts might differ. We then began to try and examine our own reactions to, and views of, Paul, in relation to these previously mentioned topics, in order to develop an awareness, generated by this introspection and reflection, that might help us when examining the book of Galatians specifically. Finally, we turned to Galatians, reading a passage together to start the morning, and letting the discussion determine the pace at which we move through Galatians, as well as the content and direction of our time together.

Respectfully submitted,

Nate Blanchard

MUSIC MINISTRY REPORT FOR ANNUAL MEETING, 2026

"O God, whom saints and angels delight to worship in heaven: Be ever present with your servants who seek through art and music to perfect the praises offered by your people on earth; and grant to them even now glimpses of your beauty, and make them worthy at length to behold it unveiled for evermore; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*" (BCP, p 819)

Dear Siblings in Christ,

It has been a busy and a soul-filling year! The music ministry is alive and well at St. Matthew's and please accept this offering as an overview of the church year.

We all discern a call to ministry, and we discern how we will carry out God's call in action for a particular ministry. The music we sing and play during our worship at St. Matthew's is an important part of this discernment. As I prepare for each worship service, the music selection process in which we prayerfully choose hymns, prelude/postlude music and service music to enhance our spiritual life is a way of connecting the dots to create a picture. The use of music, scripture and the living Word is a way to establish an image(s) of the story that we are learning about and living each and every service.

As part of my calling and responsibilities as Music Minister, I have played for weekly Sunday services and special services such as, but not limited to: The Triduum of Holy Week (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Great Vigil of Easter), The Transfiguration, Blue Christmas, and Christmas Eve. In addition to playing organ/piano for weekly and special services, the choir- Martha Bohner, Anissa DeCapria-Sanduta, Carol Hixson, Mitzie Kerstetter, Carol Lamparter, Erica Miller-Driscoll, Cyn Reid, Fran Zartman, and I, rehearse weekly for approximately an hour and fifteen minutes and also prior to each service. The music ministry has been faithfully active throughout the 2025 calendar year to the call to provide music leadership for our worship services. In addition to myself and choir, Tina Schlegel, Rick Kerstetter and Aaliyah Newton have graciously provided music for worship. Fran Zartman, in addition to singing in the choir, has provided music playing her flute during hymns, choir anthems and prelude/postlude music. In addition to weekly Sunday services and special services, music has been offered for weddings, baptisms and memorial services. For the Easter Vigil we partnered with Zion Lutheran Church, Sunbury- our choir along with Zion's Choir and their music Director, Jonathan Moser, created beautiful music for the space.

It is truly a privilege and blessing to serve this parish together as we worship our God in the beauty of holiness. As the Latin phrase says - Soli Deo Gloria – "To the glory of God alone!"

With abundant care and love,
Patrick Ishler

CUB PACK 3309 & BOY SCOUT TROOP 309

Good day, friends of St. Matthew's,

The values being taught in the scouting program emphasize character, citizenship, leadership, and service. Throughout the past year, we have been very busy working to bring those values into the lives of the youth we serve.

Our Cub Pack has experienced significant growth within the past year. We currently have 15 active boys & girls who have participated in many exciting adventures this past year.

Our Boy Scout troop currently has 10 active scouts who regularly participate in events. We took a multi-day camping trip to Washington DC in the spring and a camping trip to Gettysburg in the fall. We also attended summer camp at Camp Minsi and Goose Pond Scout Reservation.

Our scouts earned over 50 merit badges at summer camp this past summer. We also helped with numerous community service projects, such as the Susquehanna River Cleanup project, Toys4Tots, and hosted a Veterans Day Ceremony at the Mansion Nursing home.

Scouter Daniel Shellenberger earned his Eagle Scout rank this past year. For his Eagle project, he built a blessing shed for a local church. The blessing shed supplies canned food and hygiene items to anyone in need.

We also have several scouts who plan to earn their rank of Eagle Scout this coming year!

Scouter Aiden Mills is finishing up a "Take A Lure/ Leave A Lure" Fishing Lure project at the Little Shamokin Creek Pavilion in Sunbury.

Scouter Connor Swigart will be starting to build a Patio/ Firepit area at the same location.

Scouter Zachary Moore earned the Order of the Arrow Arrowman of the Year Award. This award is given to a youth for being unselfish in service and devotion to the welfare of others.

<u>Thank you for your continued support of our Cub Scout pack and our Boy Scout troop.</u>

<u>We are so grateful for the kindness and support that we continue to receive from everyone!</u>

"With the Spirit's gifts empower us for the work of ministry"

(Annual meeting Sunday)

Second Sunday after the Epiphany: Year A, January 18, 2026

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

The Reverend Dina Carter Ishler, Rector; St. Matthew's, Sunbury

Lord, you give the great commission: "Heal the sick and preach the word."
Lest the church neglect its mission and the gospel go unheard,
help us witness to your purpose with renewed integrity:
With the Spirit's gifts empower us for the work of ministry.

In the Name of God~ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today, at our annual meeting, I am excited to share with you a slideshow of pictures I've taken that help tell the story of our year…images of the moments we have shared together and of our beautiful building, our city, and the river that flows so close to us with its lifegiving water. The other reports are more detail oriented, with important information about our ministries, budget, etc., freeing me to offer mine from the sacramental and liturgical lens that is the soul of our life together. It's a slightly different kind of homily, but I want you to hear it in this space.

Recently, as part of his ongoing journey of discernment for ordained ministry, David Hollabaugh and I were reflecting not only on 2025, but on the eighteenth months since he and Matthew have become part of our community. For people who have had the experience and gift of worshipping in other traditions, as many of you have, the rhythm of the liturgical year may catch your attention-it may feel a little different than what you've known before, a little surprising and maybe even a little confusing. This is a good thing, because when parts of our life become deeply familiar we can take them for granted and their transformative power may be lost. To pay attention not only to the major liturgical events of the church year, but also to all the quieter, sometimes unseen moments that weave together a tapestry of who we are as a faithful community worshipping God and serving neighbor and each other in this place- **this** is the work that forms us ever more fully into God's people and, as we will sing in today's closing hymn: ***"With the Spirit's gifts empower us for the work of ministry."***

The church year begins on the first Sunday of Advent, and so just as the world is gearing up for the hecticness of Christmas preparations we are embracing a season centered more on

stillness; on waiting, not rushing; on honoring our understanding that all new life must be birthed from within a place of holy darkness. I truly believe that celebrating the season of Advent as we do in the Episcopal church helps us make room for God to be born among us and opens our hearts more deeply for the joy and wonder of Christmas, for the ways the ancient texts and familiar-since-childhood hymns connect us with all who have gone on before and proclaimed ***"For unto you this day is born a Savior- he is Christ the Lord."*** When the wise men arrive and remind us that we too must be so changed by the manger-turned-throne that the familiar roads no longer lead home, we prepare ourselves to be part of God's unfolding revelation in the world, telling the stories of Jesus' early life and ministry that climax in God's glory revealed on the mount of Transfiguration- Epiphany is a season that begins and ends with Light. And then we turn the corner immediately towards Ash Wednesday and Lent and journey towards the Cross with Jesus; towards the way Holy Week pulls us into the story as if we were really there; towards the lighting of the new flame at the Easter Vigil and our proclamation: ***"Rejoice now, heavenly hosts and choirs of angels, and let your trumpets shout Salvation for the victory of our mighty King."*** And then we come back the next morning to sing ***"Welcome, happy morning! Age to age shall say"***; and then forty days later we celebrate Jesus ascending to the Father; and then ten days after that the gift of the Spirit and the birth of the church at Pentecost; and then a week after that Trinity Sunday- and then we settle into the 'long green growing season' of Ordinary Time where the world around us mirrors our spiritual life in the summertime gifts of field and garden blossoming under the blessing of rain and longer, warmer days. We are fed by a steady diet of scripture that "grows" us and sustains us for the road that unfolds before us: the way of discipleship, where both the high points and the ordinary moments of our prayer and community life shape us into people who love deeply, choose mercy, seek and serve Christ in all persons, and fall short again and again only to turn back towards God's never-ending grace and love. And then, on the final Sunday of the church year, Christ the King Sunday, we remember that this King who sits at the right hand of God the Father in glorious majesty is so soon to be born among us in quietness and humility- and so it all begins again.

Centered as it is within the larger story of God's eternal longing for God's people to know him and to praise him, the threads we weave into the tapestry of our own community life are as varied and as lovely as the uniquely beloved people that we are- fearfully and wonderfully made, as psalm 139 says. Our tapestry tells the story of the same sacred ebb and flow that is the life of

the Church, a life of advancing like the tide as the Spirit works among us, of retreating when our human nature temporarily has its way, God shaping us through this holy rhythm. We have shared together in the mountaintop moments of weddings and baptisms, of Christmas and Easter and All Saints Day and St. Matthew's Day, and in all the "ordinary holiness" of our communal life of worship and fellowship and service. We have gathered to hold the 'both/and' of human sorrow and hope in the Resurrection when our loved ones enter the Nearer Presence of our Lord- it sometimes seems we do this way too often. We rejoice in the births of our babies and every milestone of their childhoods and young adulthoods, and we sit at the bedsides of the sick and the dying- sometimes all on the same day. We attend birthday parties and baby showers and bridal showers and fundraisers and the most delicious community dinners ever in our hall, and we polish brass and pull weeds and spread mulch and fix faucets and say Compline and walk the Stations and update the website and wash the holy vessels and play music and sing the hymns. We offer food and diapers to those who need them and love each other fiercely both in prayer and all these tangible acts of service: feeding, listening, caring enough to speak the truth in love, loving without boundaries or reservations ***and not only does this show a hurting and hungry world what the love of God looks like, it is authentically who we are as a community and I thank God for this each and every day.***

As your priest, I need you to know that this is what a sacramental life looks like: sacraments are visible signs of invisible grace ***and they are everywhere if only we have the eyes to see-*** grace upon grace rising up in the most unexpected places and binding us together in a life that blesses us and nourishes us for the work to come. This is no greater joy than to share in this way of life and I want **us** to fully claim this joy as our own, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit who guides and directs the Church and helps us live into our calling as members of Christ's Body. As today's Collect says: ***"Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth."***

May it ever be so! **Amen.**