

# Notes from Sabbatical Debrief

St. Michael's Episcopal Church  
Bradley Ave., Brattleboro, VT 05301

September 18, 2025

**Present in Person:** Susan Heimer (Sr. Warden), Margery McCrum, Paul Gallagher, Alex O'Pray, Belle Coles, Cary Gaunt, Chris Meyer, The Rev. Mary Lindquist, The Rev. Thad Bennett, Carol Beninati (clerk)

**Present via Videoconference:** John Spooner

The Vestry gathered from 5:00-6:30 for dinner with The Rev. Thad Bennett and the Rev. Mary Lindquist to reflect upon the sabbatical time.

In Mary's absence, we noticed a few things about how the work of the church gets done:

- How much we rely upon Mary's excellent administrative skills. (Vestry, Susie, and Thad all saw evidence of this.)
- The considerable amount of work done by parishioners. As activities continued throughout the sabbatical, we experienced that the church is not one person but, as Belle said, "all of us in a community of love".
- Thad also noted the work of our "excellent" Altar Guild and praised administrator Susie Webster-Toleno for handling any confusing or challenging situations with "kindness and ease".

Members of the Vestry described highlights of Thad's presence as sabbatical priest:

- "Signposts" testimonies during which parishioners spoke of a time in their lives when they felt God moving in their lives.
- Thad's "fresh eyes" on the health and function of our parish, which we particularly valued because he has experienced many churches. Vestry members cited:
  - Thad's clarification of the Vestry's role as the entity that approves proposals from committees and groups but doesn't spend time crafting the committees' proposals.
  - Thad's emphasis that not all of what Mary takes on needs to be or, in fact, should be left to her. Thad noted that as the only full-time employee, sometimes things fall to her because she's most frequently on site. Mary added that living next door to the church contributes to this situation as it's easier for her than for others to be available.
  - His counsel to be careful that our parish doesn't take on more than is reasonable and burn out our most hardworking parishioners.

- “God loves you—no exceptions,” an assertion that Thad made at every opportunity and had printed on stickers for cars and other locations.
- Thad’s energy and positivity.
- His pastoral care.
- His visible presence in the LGBTQ+ community. Pride Sunday, which fell during the sabbatical, was particularly inspiring this year.
- How he added clarity for the congregation, for example by letting them know to expect changes to the service and by making large-print bulletins more available.

Thad, during this debrief meeting, mentioned:

- It’s the Vestry’s job to make sure the rector doesn’t do too much.
  - Finances are NOT in the rector’s job description. That’s actually stated in the Canon.
  - Mary should ask for help (and get it). When asking for help, we should not ask the people who are already getting things done.
- Our parish is “in good shape”, by which we interpreted that he meant healthy in spirit and mission, attendance/participation, finances, and physical plant.
- We’re located in the state with the second-oldest population in the United States. We should anticipate greater needs around aging, and also that there will continue to be deaths and people retiring and moving out of our parish. (We already lost several very engaged older parishioners in the past year or so.)
- We have a welcoming community that attracts people. How do we maximize that?
  - Prioritize devoting our energy to meeting the spiritual hunger evident in the wider community. Both Mary and Thad noted that filling pews is not a goal; helping people to experience God’s love is.
  - We talked a bit about connection; Belle mentioned that serving on Team Holy Week enabled her to forge stronger connections with other parishioners.
  - Thad cautioned that “Sometimes a model that gets things done isn’t a model that builds spiritual community.” It’s great that we have highly capable people doing so many important things, but:
    - We should make room for new people to step up and feel needed.
    - We should balance taking on demanding activities with leaving room for rest, reflection, and other spiritual pursuits.
    - We shouldn’t burn out the willing workers. Accept that if we can’t find someone for a proposed undertaking, “maybe it just doesn’t get done.”

Mary shared some of what she discovered while on Sabbatical and upon returning:

- After wondering she would feel returning to St. Michael’s, she discovered that she feels “very happy to be here” and that there are still important things she’d like to do at St. Michael’s.
- She realized she needs meaningful work.

- She acknowledged that, in the past, she took on too many tasks. She has already handed some off. Her goal is to cut back on administrative duties so she can spend more time on her priestly and pastoral role.
- Part of her sabbatical included being on the cleaning team when she was on retreat. She discovered that manual labor is satisfying to her and that it's important work.
- She has been exploring Zen philosophy and practice more deeply. One of the results is that she is less attached to outcomes than she used to be. Just "Do your work," she says, and trust that God is in charge.

Belle closed the meeting with a poem from Mary Oliver, "At the River Clarion".