

# Saint George's

EPISCOPAL CHURCH

January 8, 2016

Dear Saint Georgian's,

At our December meeting, the Vestry discussed whether our upcoming nave renovation project should incorporate flexible seating in the form of formal, wooden chairs or retain our existing pews. Given the level of interest in this aspect of the renovation, we'd like to describe what we believe was our thorough and thoughtful discussion.

We began by hearing from the Renovation Committee tri-chairs, who summarized all the comments they've received on our seating options. They covered comments made during check-in sessions, comments made to each of them personally, and the twelve comment cards that have been submitted. Based on parish feedback, there appeared to be a small group that opposed any change at all to the current seating; a small group that strongly preferred chairs to pews; and a somewhat larger group that preferred pews but was open to the possibility of chairs. There also appeared to be a small group that was very excited about the prospect of chairs. The tri-chairs noted that the majority of the congregation, despite multiple opportunities and invitations, has provided no comment at all on this question.

After hearing this summary of the feedback, Shearon asked us to engage in a discernment exercise, which reminded us to hold our convictions lightly and to enter discussion with a discerning spirit. After a period of silence and prayer, we talked through the joys and challenges that we experienced when thinking about each option. All of the particular topics that came up from the congregation appeared in this discussion, as well as others that individual members of the Vestry contributed.

When discussing pews, many acknowledged an attachment to them as a tangible part of our history and as traditional fixtures that mark the space as "church." Some noted the "community" of sharing a seat or kneeler with other people, while being able to define personal space. We noted that some use the pews to stabilize themselves while getting up or down. On the other hand, we discussed that fixed pews limit the ability to accommodate people in wheelchairs. And, they commit us, and future St. Georgians, to a particular seating configuration in the nave. Retaining the pews means that the accessibility and flexibility that the renovation hopes to create will be limited to the chancel.

We discussed that the chairs represent flexibility and a more open approach to the space. This approach would be available both to us and to generations yet to come. The chairs would allow re-configuration of the space, and, unlike the pews, would open the possibility of using the labyrinth (either our existing labyrinth or one installed in the floor tiles). Chairs would allow for wheelchairs or strollers to be placed among the seats in the

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nave and thus would allow those with disabilities to be integrated into the congregation more fully. As challenges, we noted that chairs might not be as stable as pews and could be difficult to move or store. We acknowledged that choosing chairs could prove a divisive issue for some in the congregation and that we would lose some continuity between the old and the renovated space.

After this exercise, each individual member of the Vestry was given an opportunity to speak on their own sense of what they felt called to do. Many members acknowledged tension between their own personal preference for pews and their responsibility to be good stewards of the space. Several spoke of being motivated by the idea that what we choose now will likely be in place for several generations. We do not know what St. Georgian's will need from the nave in 20, 40 or 60 years. They may choose to worship very differently than we do now and/ or they may have a pressing need to monetize the space by using it for concerts or other outside events. We just cannot anticipate their needs precisely, but we can leave them as many options as possible. For many, this approach pointed clearly to the chairs.

Others were drawn directly to the chairs as accomplishing our stated goal of accessibility. They saw the chairs as an integral part of the improvements planned for the nave and thought that retaining the pews would leave the renovation incomplete.

On the whole, the members of the Vestry experienced this decision as having difficult and emotional elements, but felt drawn to the option of creating more accessibility and flexibility for us and for those who follow us. We ended our discernment by voting unanimously to proceed with the chairs. Specifically, the Vestry directed the Renovation Committee to pursue the design proposal that used formal, wooden chairs for seating in the nave and to continue its efforts to obtain a number of these chairs with arms to provide more stability for those requiring it.

As a Vestry, we hope and pray that we are responding to God's call for us to be good stewards of what we have received from our predecessors. We believe that we have done that with respect to this issue. Any of us would be happy to share our experience of the discernment with you.

Respectfully,

Crystal Hardin  
Senior Warden

*Please see below for pictures.*

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## Example of Liturgical Chairs

Dahlgren Chapel, Georgetown University, Washington, DC.

These pictures from our architects show the concept of formal, wooden chairs in a similar liturgical space. Please note that these are not the exact model we will be using.



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