

July 31, 2018

Friends,

In one of the earliest conversations about the possibility of moving to bring St. Michael's together on one campus, a long-time member of the community and respected Board member stated what all of us in the discussion were committed to, that we did not want the move to cause us to become St. Michael's *Episcopal* School in name only.

As it is for our students, the School at moments of significant change is well-served by reflecting on its identity and its most important relationships. That is what this letter aims to do -- as we embark on a historic move, to consider our Episcopal identity and affirm our relationship with our most important partner, St. Michael's Episcopal Church.

### **Our Episcopal Identity**

Alumni, parents, and staff consistently talk about how formational their St. Michael's experience was. They mention how their experiences and what they learned travels with them across space and time -- years, even decades afterward. This pattern of community members drawing on their St. Michael's experience has remained consistent for over sixty years. It did not change in 2008 when the Singleton Campus opened, and it will not change now. The reason for this consistency is those experiences are firmly rooted in St. Michael's Episcopal identity. But what does it mean to be an Episcopal school?

The National Association of Episcopal Schools (NAES), of which St. Michael's has been a member since the 1970s, answers this question. Episcopal schools...

*... are Christian communities whose missions integrate spiritual formation into all aspects of the educational experience...[in a] graceful and inclusive manner which is the hallmark of the Anglican approach to education over the centuries.*

*... are created to:*

- o be communities that honor, celebrate and worship God as the center of life;*
- o be models of God's love and grace;*
- o serve God in Christ in all persons, regardless of origin, background, ability, or religion; and*
- o strive for justice and peace among all people and [to] respect the dignity of every human being.*

*... invite all who attend and work in them—Episcopalians and non-Episcopalians, Christians and non-Christians, people of no faith tradition—both to seek clarity about their own beliefs and religions and to honor those traditions more fully and faithfully in their own lives. In fact, the intentional pluralism of most Episcopal schools is a hallmark of their missions.*

*... above all, exist not merely to educate, but to demonstrate and proclaim the unique worth and beauty of all human beings as creations of a loving, empowering God.*

This is the kind of “environment that acknowledges and develops Christian values” called for in our mission. In an effort to weave these principles into the fabric of the School’s daily life and to clarify for those outside our community what we mean by “Christian values,” our 2017-2021 strategic plan articulated seven DRAGONS Values.

k i n D n e s s  
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a c c e p t A n c e  
i n t e G r i t y  
r e s p O n s i b i l i t y  
r e s i l i e N c e  
c o m p a S s i o n

Our DRAGONS Values and the activities that instill them are seen throughout the four ways NAES suggests Episcopal schools express their identities...

1. **“School Worship** that is creative, inclusive, draws fully upon the liturgical resources of The Episcopal Church, and is a regular part of school life for all faculty and students.” At St. Michael’s we see this in regular weekly Lower & Middle School chapel services as well as seasonal worship (e.g, Blessing of the Backpacks, Advent, the Christmas Pageant, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week Eucharist, and the new Baccalaureate service the day before Graduation).
2. **“Community Life**, in which reflection, prayer, and matters of the spirit are honored and cultivated and the physical, mental, and emotional health of all are supported and nurtured.” We do this at St. Michael’s by beginning each school day with the Lord’s Prayer, weaving reflective periods throughout each student’s day, and ending the day with ample co-curricular opportunities to reinforce our DRAGONS values. Lower School homeroom teachers and Middle School advisors meet regularly to discuss not merely students’ academic work, but their social-emotional lives as well. These discussions form a crucial component of our School-Family Partnership, a foundational element of St. Michael’s program.
3. **“Religious Formation and Study** that is meaningful, academically substantive, and age-appropriate; and in teaching the Christian tradition, fosters dialogue with other faith traditions.” St. Michael’s curriculum has always provided students with the opportunity to explore in depth the Episcopal faith as well as the spiritual traditions of a variety of cultures. In Lower School Religion classes third graders study the Old Testament, fourth graders the New Testament, and fifth graders a the world’s largest religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism). In Middle School, the Approaches to Learning & Life course weaves together this same three-year progression with explorations of concentric circles of communities: St. Michael’s, Richmond, and the world. As is appropriate for early adolescence, these courses place a strong emphasis on self-discovery, identity formation, and finding one’s place in each of these communities.

Beginning this fall, Middle School students will have the opportunity to join in an optional semi-monthly faith discussion group headed by Chaplain, Christian Hansen, and supported

by math teacher Jennifer Evans, who has a great deal of youth ministry experience. The group will explore questions common among teenagers such as, "Why do we believe what we believe?" "What are questions of faith you struggle with or don't understand?"

4. ***"Social Justice, which is the integration of the ideals and concepts of equity, justice, and a just society throughout the life of the school; the embracing and honoring of diversity; and the inclusion of community service and service-learning as an integral part of the life of the school."*** Our vision is to develop empathetic, open minded, respectful and reflective young people who engage in responsible and meaningful service to the school, local and global communities. All Episcopal schools seek to raise intercultural awareness of local and global issues and encourage responsible action through investigation, planning, action, reflection, and demonstration.

At St. Michael's, social justice takes the form of service learning in four ways: direct service (e.g., Meal on Wheels), indirect service (e.g., food or clothing drives), advocacy (e.g., the 8th grade community project service fair), and research (almost any learning that expands a student's awareness of a community's need). We consider service learning an area of study that goes beyond the act of serving a community by helping students expand their understanding and skills to positively impact whatever community they may be a part of in the future. This ethos, and often the same skills and concepts, permeate the entire curriculum.

### **Our Relationship with St. Michael's Episcopal Church**

While our Episcopal identity has remained largely unchanged over six decades, our relationship with St. Michael's Episcopal Church has evolved. As depicted in the enclosed poem, *Our Foundation* by Gloria Williams Proakis, the Church-School relationship is much like that of a parent and child. Over time and with significant life events, some things remain the same (e.g., having weekly chapel) and some change (e.g., the location of chapel).

From the Church's founding of the School in 1957 as a mission, through the School's growth in succeeding decades, the two institutions' relative sizes and needs changed, but their commitment to and love for each other has not. The Church and the School have taken great care to work together to make thoughtful choices about what the move will change and what it will not. These considerations have ranged from the aesthetic (e.g., Great Hall renovations and adjustments to make chapel in the Great Hall feel even more like chapel), to the profound (e.g., financial commitments to support the Church as the School vacates the Bon Air campus).

An often-asked question is what will happen to the Bon Air campus once the School moves. The answer is that the Church, with input from the Diocese of Southern Virginia, which owns the property, will decide this. For well over a year, a joint Church-School transition workgroup has worked together to make arrangements for the School's departure and set up the Church for a transition period following that departure. Among the workgroup's efforts has been retaining the Counselors of Real Estate, a group of real estate professionals from around the country, to develop options for the Church to consider.

Beyond the move and transition period, the other major aspects of the Church-School relationship (governance, staff, and program) will remain as they are now. The bylaws of the School's Board of Directors call for at least four of its members to be parishioners at St. Michael's Episcopal Church. In addition, the Church rector sits as a non-voting ex-officio member of the School's Board. Also, a Church vestry representative attends all Board meetings. These measures ensure the Church congregation and leadership maintain a meaningful role in the direction of the School.

In terms of staffing, the rector will continue to be an importance presence in and provide essential guidance to the School community. In addition to regular meetings with the Head of School, we see this most publicly at times of celebration (e.g., graduation and the upcoming dedication of Hubbard Hall) and times of challenge (e.g., serious illness or death in the community). At such times, the Church presence is a true blessing to the School. The School Chaplain / Church Coordinator of Children and Youth Ministry position was jointly initiated by the School and Church in 2016 to further strengthen the programmatic ties between the institutions. In this role, Mr. Hansen provides additional curriculum development, daily instruction, and pastoral care (e.g., "Prayers of the Dragons") to foster our Episcopal identity.

Those programmatic ties include chapel services and seasonal worship (e.g, Blessing of the Backpacks, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week Eucharist, and the new Baccalaureate service). Service learning, such as Food Pantry support and summer mission trips as merely two examples, has long-represented an important connection between the School and Church. With the chaplain position now fully incorporated into the School faculty, and the Church considering new ways to expand its mission, service learning is an area of potential growth in the relationship.

Thus, it is upon the foundation of our Episcopal identity of worship, community, study, and justice, and through our enduring relationship born of faith that we look forward to many, many years of continuing to educate students to live into God's call to celebrate, love, and serve.

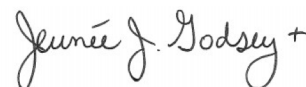
Yours in shared mission,



Michael G. Turner  
Head of School



Christian Hansen  
Chaplain



Rev. Jeunée Godsey  
Rector, ex-officio Board Member

Enclosed:  
*Our Foundation*



## **Our Foundation**

St. Michael's, our Mother,  
You gave us our start.  
You dreamed us, you birthed us,  
We give you our heart.

You gave us your name  
And faith to begin  
St. Michael's, our Mother,  
St. Michael's, our friend.

St. Michael's, our guide,  
We move on today  
Your sheltering arms  
Have lighted our way.

We now say farewell  
But no sad goodbye,  
St. Michael's, our Mother,  
You taught us to fly!

*This poem, written by Gloria Williams, who served nearly every role in the St. Michael's community as a member of the faculty, the congregation, the board, and the parent body, is presented by the School to the Church on the occasion of the first baccalaureate service on June 6, 2018, the final school event on the Bon Air Campus prior to the school's relocation. It is hoped, that the poem will be read each year around the anniversary of the School's opening on September 10, 1957 as a reminder not only of the School's beginnings, but also of the essential and ongoing relationship between the School and the Church.*