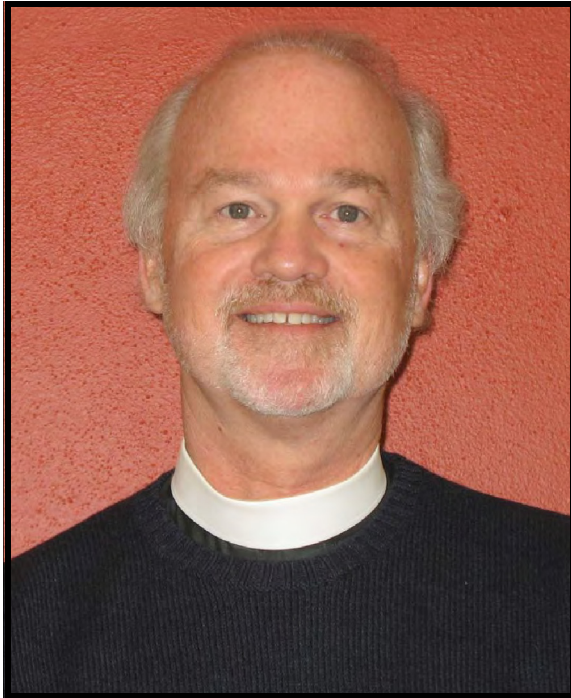


THE REV. JOHN SHERIDAN SMYLIE



Wyoming is a rural state, or residents are aging, much of our population is transient and we encompass a wide range of social economic groups. How does your training and experience prepare you for our geography and demographics?

In 2005 I was given the opportunity to be the convention speaker for the diocese of Wyoming. Following the convention, the Bishop made me available to congregations around the diocese. In that role of leading conferences, retreats, educational events, musical offerings, pastoral and spiritual support to congregations and individuals, I was also given the opportunity to explore much of Wyoming. Traveling around the diocese of Wyoming in 2005 and then again in 2006 to offer more programs throughout the diocese, I fell in love with the state. I see the geography as a joy not a problem. There is a side of me that is contemplative and the long and quiet roads feed my spirit.

Since moving to Wyoming in January of 2007 to serve as Rector of St. Mark's in Casper, I have had the opportunity to travel throughout even more of the state in my role of serving on the foundation of the diocese and as president of the board of directors for Thomas Apostle Center.

Since being ordained in 1982 I have had the opportunity to serve in rural, suburban and urban environments. Having a deaf son has exposed me to another culture within my own family. Today at St. Mark's in Casper we are constantly meeting a transient population who come to our food closet. We have redesigned this Ministry to meet the ever-changing needs of our current challenging economic environment. The bottom line principle is to show respect to each one who comes in the door asking for help.

How would you support and strengthen our community, balancing the needs of our mutual Ministry congregations guided by regional Ministry developers, with the needs of the Rector -- led congregations?

When I first came to Wyoming I learned of tensions between Rector led congregations and the Mutual Ministry model. At first I didn't understand the tensions but after living here I believe I have a better handle on these concerns today. Our current bishop was called to strengthen smaller congregations and to develop a model of Ministry in Wyoming that would allow vulnerable congregations to be sustained. This has been done, though the current financial constraints within the diocese will need to be addressed regarding the care of our shared ministry congregations. I believe the current structure spreads our Ministry developers very thin and may leave them vulnerable to burn out. Rector-led congregations, while being important to the strength of the diocese and to the diocesan budget, have not received as much attention as Mutual Ministry congregations over the past decade. I believe this concern can begin to be addressed by re-envisioning us as "one diocese", stressing our commonalities rather than our differences. Since coming to Wyoming, I have sought to serve as a bridge between Rector-led congregations and mutual ministry congregations. We have come to a new day and the movement towards the development of apostolic teams is an example of bridge building between the Bishop, Rectors, Ministry developers and local congregations.

In the years ahead I hope to explore how Rector led congregations may participate in and learn from the shared ministry model. I would seek to provide opportunities for all leaders to gather using regional centers like the Cathedral, Wyoming Wilderness Camp, Thomas Apostle Center and the Diocesan office as places where we could do this relational work while also making time to have some fun together.

Our congregations have a rich history of Christian outreach. Tell us about your experience in outreach.

The first church I ever served as Rector was in Hope, New Jersey. There were budgetary constraints in the public schools and the music and art program was dropped. Though we were a small church we took on the challenge of providing an alternative music and art program for the children of the community. Members of the congregation, talented in fine arts and in music, shared their gifts to serve the children. This action led the congregation into a relationship with all segments of that rural community where all the children were welcome regardless of their economic status.

In Hamburg, New York we developed a nursing home program that won an outreach award. In the mid-1990s, I was an advocate for the Episcopal Conference of the Deaf at General Convention and was able to influence the Program Budget and Finance Committee to revise their budget to include Ministry among the deaf on a national level.

While at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, white supremacists were gaining national attention and the leadership of the Cathedral and the Jewish Temple organized a March Against Hatred beginning at the Temple and ending at the Cathedral. Over 1800 people joined our march whereas the white supremacists only had about 20 in theirs.

St. Mark's is known for its outreach. In the midst of these difficult economic times we have maintained a tithe from our budget to support outreach opportunities. We have an active food ministry that has increased significantly over the last nine months. St. Mark's supports the millennium development goals with an offering from our budget and with special projects. In the Diocese of Wyoming I have been a key voice in the development of the Mustard Seed Mission for our congregations.

Our congregations want to grow. Tell us about your experience in growing congregations.

Throughout the Episcopal Church there is a crisis of growth. The "Report to the 76th General Convention" (59-81) presents a statistical analysis that dramatically shows these concerns. Though nearly all the congregations I have served in my 26 years have shown moderate growth, growth can be a tricky business. One key is to develop a strong youth program. Everywhere I have served as Rector and as an assistant, we have done this. Most recently there was no junior high or senior high youth program at St. Mark's. We now have an average attendance of 15 to 25 young people coming every Wednesday from September through May.

In Hamburg, we experimented with an alternative worship service held on Saturday evenings. A band opened with 20 to 30 minutes of praise music with words projected on a screen. The celebrant would wear casual clothes with a stole. A relaxed atmosphere was created and prayers for healing were available at the end of the service. This effort increased our attendance.

Another effective way for inviting healthy growth is by developing small group ministries designed to meet needs found in the community. I believe that the keys for growth in our Episcopal Churches are centered on worship, fellowship and youth. The Wind and Wings program started in 2005 is worth much effort in the years ahead. The concept behind it, of ministering to all the children in our state, is a worthy concept that will have long term positive repercussions. In the years ahead I hope our church will recognize and create new possibilities for worship experiences that are more accessible and more connected to the realities of those who walk through our doors, by tapping into the creative talents of those within our communities.