Change. Just saying the word puts us on edge. The prospect of change causes anxiety and worry. It can lead to an irrational sense of panic and cause us to resist new ideas simply because they are different. Yet as much as we might resist change in our own lives nowhere does change come more slowly or face more resistance than in the Church.

This is rather unfortunate because change is inevitable. No matter how much we might fight against it or try to pretend that it isn’t happening change comes to us all. Yet for all its anxiety change can be the catalyst of growth. It challenges old assumptions and can even be the source of new life. And so if we want to learn and grow we had better learn how to accept and cope with the reality of change.

If we look back at 2014 this is a truth that our parish knows only too well. In many ways we are not the same St. Timothy’s we were just one year ago. In fact other than when I first arrived I can’t think of a time in which we have experienced more upheaval. This past year saw the departure of two long serving and faithful staff members. John O’Neill left us in early March and Michael Berman in October. Needless to say it has been an adjustment to life without them. It is hard to measure all the ways in which they helped shape our parish over the past decade and I know that both are still missed.

We also bid farewell to a number of faithful parishioners including Chip Brady, Bob Hoffman, Gladys Keely, Charm Palaschek and David Knapton. It is fair to say that we are not the same without them.

These were hard changes. Yet they also lead to new beginnings. Mark Sullivan came on board at the end of March. His experience in both the business and church worlds has helped him fit in and make a real difference. Dr. Cho started right after Michael’s departure and her style and energy has made an immediate and positive impact on our music and worship.

Yet we saw other additions most particularly in terms of the Community Garden and Wellness Ministry. In a very short time the garden became the center for a new kind of community that gathered to plant and tend and that shared some of the bounty with anyone who asked. The Wellness Ministry also reached out beyond our walls and offered workshops on healthy eating and living. We also added a monthly spirituality group, outdoor coffee hours in the summer and regular highlighting of our community partners in ministry. All of this added to the sense of vitality and connection that are so important to this place.

Yes, it is safe to say we are certainly not the same parish that we were just twelve months ago. And so it is important to take the time to look back and reflect. To mourn for those we have lost, to look back fondly on memories of the way things were and to give thanks for the joy and accomplishments we shared.

I bring all this up, not simply as a point of reflection but also to acknowledge the fact that change will continue as we move forward. The truth is that we will continue to bid farewell to dear friends and sometimes we will struggle to adapt to other changes in our practices and programs. Which brings me to the last major event from the past year- the Appreciative Inquiry process. It was interesting to see that many of you think about our parish in remarkably similar terms. You value the fact that we are a caring community that tries to make everyone feel welcome. You value our diversity and the fact that we manage to be both traditional in our worship and yet also real and unpretentious. You value the fact that we give you the chance to feel a part of
something bigger and to help make a difference in the world. But nowhere were you more in agreement than in your wishes for what we might become. Your number one wish was to have more people here. No answer could make me happier because it means that you value what we are so much that you want to make sure it gets shared with as many people as possible.

However, if you are really serious about making this wish a reality then you need to know that it comes at a cost. It means that we have work to do and perhaps more importantly it means accepting that we will have to continue to change in order to attract and keep them.

Let that sink in for a moment. If you truly want to see more people in our pews then you will have to change. That might sound strange because the truth is that we are already doing so many good things. We are healthy and happy. But if all that currently do was enough then we would already see the kind of growth that you are wishing for. And so if we are going to grow then we are going to have to change. Coming to terms with this reality is critical because willingness to accept change in order to benefit those who are not yet a part of your parish is what truly separates a healthy church from a dying one.

So what will it take in order to make your wish for more people into a reality? The truth is that I don’t know. If I had the magic formula to bring them in, believe me, we would already be using it. We are just going to have to find out together. In the months and years to come we will think and pray and talk. We will try new things and reinvent old ones. Some of them will work. Others won’t.

But above all there is one change that I know we will have to make if we are going to see our numbers grow in the way you want. It is this- you will have to play a part in making it happen. No matter how hard I work or how inspired I might be I cannot do it. Deacon Alex cannot do it. The staff cannot do it. The Vestry and the other handful of people who volunteer for everything around here cannot do it. The only way this wish will come true is if YOU make it happen. That means that you will need to bring them in. You will need to meet them out in the community. You will need to invite them and welcome them. You will need to shepherd them to coffee hour and at other social events. You will need to help them get involved. You will need to make room for them in your pew and in your favorite activity.

This won’t always be easy. Change can be hard. Letting go of the way things used to be can be sad. Wondering about what we will become can be scary. But even in the midst of our greatest upheaval we do not lose hope. For we know that even when everything we thought we knew or could count on seems to be falling apart that G-D still stands- firm, eternal and unchanging.

When we stand on that footing we are empowered to look past the fear and see in the coming changes not simply losses but also opportunities to become more and more the parish that G-D would have us become. For unless we adapt to the changes going on in the world we cannot minister to it. That perspective can lead us to see all these changes not simply as challenges but as opportunities... as the chance for us to become the St Timothy’s that G-D would have us be in order that we might continue to share His love with a broken world.

With that in mind we can face the joys and challenges of the coming year with renewed confidence and hope. May G-D bless you. May G-D bless St Timothy’s for his year and for all the years to come.