



# The Episcopal Diocese of Georgia

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## St. John and St. Mark's, Albany

### Bringing the Church to the Community

The Congregation of St. John and St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Albany, Georgia, has had a long-standing relationship with its surrounding community of Radium Springs. The parishioners of this church offer many annual outreach ministries to the community including Halloween and Christmas Block Parties, Teacher Appreciation breakfasts at the Radium Springs Middle School, and clothing drives to benefit non-profits in the area.

The congregation has established an intention to care for their fellow man, and in recent years has begun taking steps towards building a signature ministry out of its Parish Hall. The original idea was to develop a cyber café.

Deacon Johnny Tuttle of St. John and St. Mark's shares his initial impression of the parish, "Actually when I interviewed and first started talking to Canon Frank Logue about coming to this diocese, he described their outreach and congregation and what they were trying to accomplish. The cyber café and the block parties were both incredibly appealing to me. So I jumped on that and gravitated toward that." He adds, "They were listening to people in the neighborhood and were trying to respond to what they were hearing. One of the things that they noticed was that there were a lot of kids in the neighborhood. They were trying to provide for a need for school computers in the neighborhood."

After receiving some donations, the Cyber Café became a reality. The church had acquired the computers and the servers and the volunteers to make it happen. But the seats were empty.

Tuttle says, "When I arrived the Cyber Café had already been established and was beginning to fade. The congregation made it clear that this project didn't work out the way they wanted it to. Since the church had already established a relationship with the Radium Springs Middle School, I connected through our parishioners to set up a meeting with the school Principal. I had a conversation with him in his office about what we could be doing to get more involved with the school."

Through this conversation, Tuttle learned that several factors were playing into the lack of interest in the Cyber Café. The students at the middle school had school assigned iPads that they were able to take home at night, negating the need for a Cyber Café. In addition, the principal expressed that the school has issues getting people involved. "He basically said it is near impossible to get people to come to anything-it doesn't matter what it is. Not afterschool tutoring, not even PTO meetings. The only thing people show up to is something with incentive," shares Tuttle.

The congregation realized it needed to reassess its outreach and begin talking about how to move forward. Tuttle said, "We're going to need to go where we want to do outreach and ministry rather than demanding that they come to us."

This notion of taking the church to the community has lead to some really inspirational ideas from the congregation of St. John and St. Mark's. Tuttle shares, "The church obviously doesn't have a lot of substantial means to lure members of the community to our ministry. But we do have a lot of retired educators in our congregation. The principal told us that it would be helpful to enter the school as mentors and tutors. So that's a direction we've begun moving towards."

But the church hasn't entirely given up on the idea of a Cyber Café either. Tuttle states, "On the other side of this, removed from the school, is an interest in a Prisoner re-entry program. The governor is trying to implement this program in Georgia to help formerly incarcerated people re-enter the workforce and general population. It's possible we could offer these computers as a resource to look for jobs and apartments and general needs. But that's a little further down the road."

It's become apparent in this congregation is determined to keep moving forward, despite the many hurdles it has face so far. "Honestly when I arrived, folks were generally disappointed that the original Cyber Cafe hadn't taken off. There's a genuine desire to be a part of this community and to offer something to the community that is substantial. I think the Cyber Café was a real try in that direction. But I think that the people here are just committed to doing what they can to become part of this community. So we're really in this position where we're looking around us and trying to match our gifts to the needs of the community," says Tuttle.

The truly inspiring moral of this story is that this parish is clearly going to continue working towards building a relationship with their community. "That's kind of the point. We're always learning and reassessing. The fact that we keep showing up for this community with excitement- that alone is encouraging."