

Grace and peace to you in our Lord Jesus Christ!

This will be the first in many introductions, I'm sure, but I am delighted and honored to be coming to serve as your rector. You have offered much prayer, thoughtfulness, and patience throughout the work of discerning a call for a new rector. Your search committee, vestry, and diocesan support staff have likewise worked so hard on your behalf and deserve all our appreciation. I could not be more pleased that—with the support of our bishop—I have answered this call to our mutual work of loving God, sharing Jesus, and rejoicing in the Spirit together!

I look forward to getting to know all of you and I'm sure you're curious to know more about me. I am from Michigan originally, though my own long and winding road that has led me to St. Stephen's has included Columbus, Ohio; Indianapolis, Indiana; Boston, Massachusetts; Alexandria, Virginia; and Waco, Texas among other locales. I am deeply passionate about education. I studied at Eastern Michigan University to be a High School Social Studies teacher before finding myself working in Academic Administration at EMU itself, working to help at-risk students receive the help and training they needed to be successful in school. During this time I experienced many potential church homes—I attended Catholic churches, Methodists churches, Presbyterian churches, Lutheran churches, and many more—before finding my home in The Episcopal Church. After many years of prayerful discernment and the encouragement of the Bishop of Indianapolis, I decided to pursue the vocation of priest in the church. I attended Indiana Wesleyan University for a degree in the Holy Scriptures, completed the Education for Ministry program, and attended Virginia Theological Seminary to be trained as a priest.

While in seminary, Bishop Andy Doyle invited me to come to serve in the Diocese of Texas. I accepted a call to serve at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Waco while also serving as the College Missioner for the Baylor University campus. During this time, I worked to welcome others into the church that has been such a welcoming home to me. We Episcopalians are blessed to be a part of a tradition that values inclusiveness, hospitality, and empowering our laypeople to be leaders in ministry. In a world where people can so often be left to feel broken and alone, we are well poised to extend our arms to them and show them the beloved children of God that they are.

My wife, Katie, is a cradle Episcopalian and a source of ever-present support and encouragement in my life. We have two children—Elliott, who is 3 years old, and Owen, who is 8 months old—and they are a constant source of liveliness and surprise in our world. As a family, we're excited to get to know our new hometown of Beaumont. We are fans of cooking and restaurants, outdoor activities, parks and museums and the arts. Katie and I have hearts for service to the community and are so very eager to start taking part of the wonderful ways in which St. Stephen's is engaged in service to those in the community around them on a regular basis. We expect lots of wonderful times to come!

We also have some wonderful celebrations coming up when we arrive. There is going to be a welcoming reception on June 18 for our arrival, and I'm looking forward to meeting many of your there. We will also have a Celebration of New Ministry together—presided over by Bishop

Doyle—on August 22. And there will be many opportunities to come to gather and celebrate and grow together in this new chapter in the life of St. Stephen's.

In the meantime, before I can be physically present with you there, please know that I am keeping the good people of St. Stephen's in my prayers. I can say without a doubt that the Holy Spirit is hard at work in Southeast Texas and that we—with God's help—are going to have a lot of exciting times ahead.

If you would like to introduce yourself to me before I get there, I'd love to hear from you at sbalke@ststephensbmt.org

And until we meet face-to-face, may the Lord bless you and keep you, make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, lift his countenance upon you and give you peace (Numbers 6:24-26).

Faithfully,

The Rev. Steven M. Balke, Jr.