

Stained glass in Christ Church.



Rev. Rich

EPISCOPAL IDENTITY

Rich Clark's usual good-natured visage turns thoughtful and laser focused when he's asked to define exactly what it means for Saint Stephen's to be an Episcopal school. The chaplain searches for an answer that's perhaps easy to digest, but it's clear there is really no simple talking point to recite. While there are certain characteristics that Episcopal schools share in common, no one answer completely satisfies the question.

All Episcopal schools are distinguished by an environment where spiritual awareness is valued and God's presence in daily life is recognized, but how they get there is an individual journey. For Clark, Saint Stephen's chaplain since 2017, he moves quickly from a textbook-like definition to something much more personal.

"This is a community I've never truly experienced outside of family," he says. "You've seen the stickers on cars and t-shirts that say 'Salt Life,' right? Well, here I think it really is 'Falcon Life' – and that's more than just school pride. It's something bigger."

Saint Stephen's doesn't require families to identify a religious preference during application and the vast majority typically leave that question unanswered. However, of the 23% of the students enrolled during the 2019-20 school year who did specify a religious affiliation, only 2% identified as Episcopal – fewer than 20 students. While that may seem surprising, it's not unusual. According to the National Association of Episcopal Schools (NAES), of the more than 160,000 students who attend 1,182 Episcopal schools worldwide, only about 25% are Episcopalian.

That trend wasn't necessarily the case at Saint Stephen's formation in 1970. Many of the school's founders were parishioners of Christ Episcopal Church. In fact, they relied on Rev. Fred Kyle, the church rector at the time, to support the concept of using its facilities to create SSES. He was in agreement, but the ultimate decision was left to the bishop of the Episcopal diocese, William Hargrave.

Several Christ Church members traveled to St. Petersburg to sit down with Bishop Hargrave in 1969 to make their case for the school. The bishop agreed, with the stipulation that Saint Stephen's would be independent of, but a mission of the Episcopal Church.

From its founding through 1987, Saint Stephen's was led by three Episcopal priests (Revs. Rodman Kypke, Louis Hayden Jr., and Bennett Barnes) who served as headmasters. But by the time of Barnes' departure, the makeup of the school had become more diverse and it was decided that Saint Stephen's would be better served by hiring an experienced educator as its leader.

Regardless of that transition, the school maintained its Episcopal approach to faith and spiritual education revolving around inclusion, understanding, compassion, character, and ethics.

The NAES "Principles of Good Practice for Chapel and Worship" describes Episcopal schools as communities established not solely for Christians but as diverse ministries of educational and human formation for people of all faiths and backgrounds. While Christian-centered, Saint Stephen's is proud of the diversity of religious faiths represented on campus. All families and children are welcomed without question. This diversity is a strength.

SSES is an "independent" Episcopal school (a school connected to a local Episcopal church but not governed by that church) rather than a "parish day" school (a school totally governed by the local church). Neighboring Christ Episcopal Church is the setting for regular services where scripture and inspiring messages are shared, prayers are offered, and student musicians perform. Chapel is an integral part of school life at every grade level. Each week, students gather in their respective divisions for 30-minute services.

Upper School students take further responsibility by planning their own chapels. It's a time when the entire school community – Christians, Hindu, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and people of no faith tradition — comes together to encourage individual and shared journeys of faith and spirit.

For the past six years, SSES Head of School Dr. Jan Pullen has been a member of the 21-member NAES Governing Board, which is made up of heads of school, rectors, chaplains and bishops from around the U.S.

"NAES is truly an organization that sets a high standard for how Episcopal schools conduct themselves to ensure that the

institution provides a strong learning environment and one that instills the values of integrity, kindness, and appreciation of others," she says. "I have always loved that our students, because we are an Episcopal school, have the opportunity and freedom to discuss religion and attend chapel service to hear prayers and the viewpoints of others. For me, it brings us all closer to one another and to God."

According to Clark, who attended an Episcopal middle school, a Catholic high school, and also served as chaplain at the University of Florida, the reputation for academic excellence that Episcopal schools have established is interconnected with some of the basic concepts of the faith he learned as a seminarian: Do good work and strive for excellence because you have very specific gifts from God that are unique to you. Be a role model, a leader, and assert yourself in these roles.

"You have to be able to listen and to ask questions. Isn't that what also defines good education? Inviting people and connecting people is what good schools do," he says. "Saint Stephen's is a place – in the Episcopal tradition – that encourages creativity, innovation and truly proves that together we're so much stronger."

NAES Episcopal school characteristics:

- 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.
- 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.
- Religious Formation and Study that is meaningful, academically substantive, and age-appropriate; and in teaching the Christian tradition, fosters dialogue with other faith traditions.
- 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.