

St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School
"Spread The Word" for MAESA Matters Oct 2018

As a member of the Church Schools in the Diocese of Virginia, St. Stephen's and St. Agnes School's foundation and mission are rooted firmly in the tenets of its Episcopal identity. This identity reaches all corners of the community, informs its programs, inspires its students to embrace opportunities for service, and ensures that each member of the community can stand in their own faith and be open to all.

The principles and ideals of the school's Episcopal identity are experienced through inclusive weekly chapel services on each of its three campuses, age-appropriate religious study that uses the teaching of Christianity to foster dialogue with other faith traditions, and community engagement that allows students to develop an understanding of equity, justice, and inclusion, and practice empathy and environmental stewardship.

The National Association of Episcopal Schools identifies four pathways in which Episcopal identity is expressed in schools: social justice, religious formation and study, community life, and school worship. At the intersection of the latter two pathways are treasured traditions at the St. Stephen's and St. Agnes Lower School, home to students in junior kindergarten through fifth grade.

At the beginning of each chapel, prelude music is offered by a student pianist before fifth graders lead the procession of participants and proudly serve as acolytes. They display serious and determined faces as they light the candles and looks of accomplishment as they "change the light" by extinguishing them.

Junior kindergarten and kindergarten students join together with increasing confidence to give a musical offering to the assembled group of students, parents, and faculty and staff members. Parents and adult family members are welcome to attend chapel services and they look proudly upon students selected to participate in each chapel. This includes second and third grade students who read the psalm and the lesson.

Fourth graders read prayers written throughout the week by their peers. Students often offer prayers for family members, their pets, their teachers, and each other. In the *school cycle of prayer*, individual homeroom teachers and their students, specials teachers, and members of the administrative team are prayed for by name. Students, teachers, and staff members celebrating birthdays that week stand as the school birthday prayer is offered for them.

First graders stand together and recite the school prayer:

Our heavenly Father, we give you thanks this day for all the blessings you have showered upon us—our free land, food, shelter, and the ability to work and play without fear. We ask that you would look with compassion upon all children in distress wherever they may be. Grant them and us your peace in the name of the Christ Child. Amen.

Each chapel includes a homily offered by a chaplain, teacher, administrator, or group of students. The lower school students' especially appreciate hearing from Upper School students.

As the service nears its conclusion, students wait with eager anticipation to hear which two grade-levels will gather with the head of school and the lower school head so they may offer a handshake and greeting and receive one in return. Students are reminded that they are “giving seven” by offering their five fingers and steady eye-contact during the exchange. This treasured tradition serves to validate our young learners and inspire them for future engagement. Upper school students and alumni often speak of their desire to replicate this and other warm connections they experienced in lower school chapel.

The St. Stephen's and St. Agnes mission guides faculty, staff, and families to honor the unique value of each of its members as a child of God in a caring community. They appreciate this and other opportunities for MAESA schools to share practices and celebrate our Episcopal identity. They will relish the opportunity to “give seven” to the teachers and administrators attending the MAESA Early Childhood Conference at the SSSAS Lower School on Friday, October 26.