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Dear Friends in Christ,

Just about five months ago I embarked on a time of discernment to understand more keenly the nature of the diaconal ministry to which God is calling me. Early in this process I spent a soul-soothing week at Loyola on the Potomac, a Jesuit retreat center in Maryland. This gave me a much-needed opportunity to sit quietly in the presence of God and in the beauty of nature.

My call to engage in ministry responding to the opioid crisis has been repeatedly affirmed during this time with opportunities to engage in this issue emerging even before my farewell Sunday last September. I have been working closely with two others drawn to this issue – Karl Colder and Amanda Kotval, and the three of us have established the Diocesan Addiction and Recovery Team (DART) to respond to the current crisis. One of our initiatives is developing a regional model to create collaboration among parishes, and our own Central Richmond Region has stepped forward to pilot this ministry model along with the North Piedmont Region. In addition to my work with the DART and Province III Task Force, I will be leading this pilot program in our region.

During our time away from St. Andrew's, John and I have attended services at many other churches in our region and beyond. We are both grateful for the opportunity to experience the vibrant and diverse Christian witness that occurs each Sunday throughout our diocese. It has been a joyful reminder of the beauty and sublime nature of our Anglican tradition and the way in which the unique personality and temperament of each faith community comes bursting through the liturgies of our beautiful yet adaptable Book of Common Prayer. It has been exciting and inspiring to learn of the varied ministries occurring in these congregations and meeting our brothers and sisters in diverse venues.

This time away has also reminded us of the importance of community. Even as we have been graciously welcomed to a new place each Sunday, we have missed that sense of community – of belonging in a particular place. As we approach the season of Lent we long to once again to make the arduous and powerful journey to the Cross then eagerly live into the Easter miracle with the people we love as family. John and I look forward to returning to Saint Andrew's on Wednesday, March 6, to celebrate Ash Wednesday.

We are both excited to be returning to this beloved community. Even as I once again serve as deacon at St. Andrew's, my ministry will indeed be something new. My time away has enabled me to regain my sense of call as a deacon to focus "particularly on developing ministries to those in need." I am grateful for the encouragement and support that Andrew has offered to me over these past months and the intriguing prospect of developing new ministries at St. Andrew's guided by his fresh perspective and vision.

While John and I have been away these past few months, we have held you closely in our hearts during our absence and look forward to the joyful prospect of coming home again.

Faithfully,

Barbara