

Report of the Urban Cathedral Study Group

Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Burlington, VT

January, 2018

Preamble: Asking the Questions

When the members of the Urban Cathedral Study Group--Paul Van de Graaf, Lisa Schnell, Jeanne Finan, Josh Brown, John Rouleau, Jenny Sisk, and Lee Williams--began our work in January of 2017, we tried to make it as clear as we could to the congregation that we were not a planning group, that it was, instead, our aim to spend the entire year learning what it means to be an urban cathedral in Burlington, VT by reading and listening and asking questions. It was our belief that we would be able to avoid any tendencies toward the prescriptive by remaining open and interrogative in our approach.

We have, we believe, been successful in that aim, and that is also why we would like these pages to be seen as something of a journey, and not a destination. It does provide a map of sorts, but not directions to any specific place.

Still, a map is a significant document, and necessary to get to an eventual destination. So, when it came time to collect what we had learned, we chose to retain the interrogative mode by sharing what we have identified as the "Emerging Questions" that developed from our conversations. These questions--which follow each section of the report--should be seen both as a summary of our work and also as guideposts for any work that might follow with a mandate of planning a future path for the Cathedral. We put it in the hands of the Vestry to decide how and when that planning might be done.

We are all deeply grateful for the opportunity we have had to do this work with each other, and with those with whom we had conversations, both within and without the parish. (Please note that the committee's [Mid-Year Update](#) contains summaries of most of the conversations we had.) It has been an uncommonly rich experience. During the year, a year in which the seven of us met every single week, and sometimes more than once in a week, to discuss our thoughts and findings, we have been aware of the value and blessing of the small communities of folks that can form within a larger parish community. And although it is outside the issues we take up here having to do with the mission of an urban cathedral, if we were to make one unequivocal recommendation at the end of this year, it would be that we find ways at St. Paul's to encourage and support more small group experiences that are dedicated to regular, and perhaps slightly improvisational, study and exploration.

We are also grateful to the following people from outside the St. Paul's community whose conversations with us were invaluable as we learned about and reflected on the role of an urban cathedral: the Rev. Kevin Johnson, the Rev. Anne Bonnyman, the Rt. Rev. Brian Cole, the Very Rev. Gail Greenwell, Tom Cullins, Richard Deane, Mayor Miro Weinberger, Liz Miller, David White, Noelle MacKay, Chief Brandon del Pozo, Keshia Ram, Janet Hunt, Emily Lee, Ali Dieng,

Raquel Aronhime, Michael Dabroski, Madeline Bell, Jessica Handrik, Amy Cunningham, Kiersten Williams, Adam Brooks, Heidi Swevens, Rev. Laura Engleken, Sr. Pat McKittrick, Susan Sutton, the Rev. Scott White, the Rev. Canon Linda Grenz, Jane Knodell, The Rev. Scott Gunn, Rabbi Amy Small, the Rt. Rev. Thomas Ely. And we offer our thanks, too, to the many, many people from within the St. Paul's community whose input was integral to our work.

We are pleased to share our work with you in the report that follows, and we are grateful for your thoughtful consideration of the findings and questions that we present.

N.B. Throughout the electronic version of this document, you will see some words and phrases in blue and underlined--those are links to websites and other documents that provide further information and resources about the topic.

I. A Cathedral is a place of “spiritual significance and discovery”

“The primary purpose . . . of both parish church and cathedral is to be a place of worship, a place where people gather to celebrate the church’s liturgy through words, music, silence, symbols, and sacramental signs.” *Holy Ground: Cathedrals in the Twenty-First Century* (2017)

It is important to begin here, with worship.

The Urban Cathedral Study Group (UCSG) spent the twelve months of 2017 reading, listening, and talking about what it means to be an urban cathedral in Burlington VT in the twenty-first century. We read widely, and we listened to a wide variety of people: clergy (including clergy from other denominations and faith traditions), church leaders, architects, local politicians and others involved in civic government, community organizers, artists and arts organizations, non-profit organizations. And the staff, the Vestry, and the parishioners of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul.

We did recognize immediately that we are a small cathedral in a small city. We were also always aware that we don’t have a “cathedral-sized” endowment. Still, much of what we learned about the character of cathedrals, appropriately scaled down, did speak to us.

When all was said and done, the most important thing we learned—or were reminded of—is what we already know: the most meaningful and necessary thing a cathedral does, the best gift we have to offer, is to provide a meaningful experience of **worship**. What we do liturgically and musically when we gather for worship nourishes us and flows out into all our other commitments as individuals and as a community. Cathedrals, says Stephen Platten, in the book we quote above, “have become nurseries and even laboratories of liturgical theology and practice.”

Whatever else we do as an urban Episcopal cathedral, a rich and meaningful worship experience that marshals the considerable talent and dedication we have in both our clergy and lay resources must always be our first priority. There is certainly room for some future innovation in how and perhaps even when we worship, but we are aware of the considerable value of what we are doing *now*, and the fact that we do it very well. We note that there has been a constant stream of newcomers to the Cathedral over the past few years, people who are drawn to the transcendent worship experience we offer every single week.

Beyond the worship experience we offer for regular parishioners of St. Paul’s, it is worship that we are chiefly known for as the Cathedral within the Diocese. According to Bishop Ely, Episcopalians from outside of Burlington who visit the Cathedral--often for special services--greatly value the preaching and music they hear at St. Paul’s.

Apropos of this, we wondered, too, about the possibility of reaching out more directly to our hotel neighbors to invite them to worship with us. It seems that we might be missing out on a valuable opportunity to let visitors to Burlington know about our architecturally significant building as well as our extraordinary music and preaching.

Even just this simple gesture of invitation would begin to acknowledge what we have spent much of the year considering: if we are to live fully into our role as Cathedral, we need to embrace St. Paul's as not only a *sacred space* but also *common ground*.

Cathedrals, though they are recognized as having an important liturgical role within their dioceses, are also often defined by their spiritual function within a wider public. We heard from many people associated with cathedrals (and other urban churches) that they now put fewer resources toward explicitly growing Sunday morning membership, and more into building ways of inviting non-members in the doors for events that provide spiritual sustenance more generally. (Not surprisingly, those churches often also find their Sunday-morning membership growing.)

In a secular age that nonetheless (or that therefore) is characterized by great spiritual longing, St. Paul's might consider expanding non-eucharistic services—like Taize—that attract people in the community who identify as “spiritual but not religious.” We believe there are many opportunities for this kind of spiritual outreach.

Emerging Questions

Are there ways that the Cathedral can continue to evolve as a “nursery and even laboratory” of Episcopal liturgical practice?

How we can remain vibrant as a Christian institution in an increasingly secular society?

Could we enhance our status as a “destination church” for visitors from outside of Burlington, even outside the state?

Could we become a better-recognized place of spiritual sustenance for seekers who don't identify as Episcopalian (or even as Christian)?

II. Cathedrals are buildings (that require resources)

The Very Rev. June Osborne, the former Dean of Salisbury Cathedral in England says that cathedrals “operate in many ways as church at its most counter-cultural.” It is the role of a cathedral to “keep alive the rumor of God, whether in the local and regional communities or in the diocese and beyond.” One of the places that such a rumor can flourish is in the cathedral building itself, which, as both a sacred space and common ground, often functions as a significant *public* building that, in any given week, might have more non-members than members coming through its doors.

Often, cathedrals are also important buildings architecturally that require substantial resources to be maintained. This is certainly the case for St. Paul's, which, as an iconic but aging example of the Le Corbusier-inspired school of brutalist architecture, requires resources for maintenance and upgrades that have stretched our current means. Ahead of us lie much [greater infrastructure needs](#) for which we have no current means.

A conversation the UCSG had with architects Tom Cullins and Richard Deane late in the spring, together with presentations to the Adult Forum by members of the Cathedral—Dottie Darling, Estelle Deane, Barbara Gay, Pat Wheeler, and others—who had been active in both the old St. Paul's and the new after a fire in February 1971 destroyed the original church building on St. Paul Street, reinforced for us the deliberateness with which the building in which

we now worship was designed to be a center of the Burlington community, a true *cathedral* and not just a parish church. It was hoped in 1973 when the church was consecrated that the new Cathedral Church of St. Paul would be an anchor for urban renewal in a downtown that was in a time of transition. A great deal of priority was given, for instance, to the acoustics of the new church: a famous acoustical engineering firm in Boston was hired to design the beautiful wall of wooden baffles on the north wall to optimize the acoustics in the nave. The vision at the time was that St. Paul's would become a significant performing arts space in Burlington, and possibly also a space where the public could gather for other purposes, mainly civic in nature.

The current development of downtown Burlington, which echoes the urban renewal of the early 1970's, presents us with a new opportunity to examine our potential as a space for common ground. The conversations we had with representatives of Burlington city government focussed on, among other things, [the increased prominence that Cherry Street will have](#) in that renewed downtown as a thoroughfare between Church Street and Lake Champlain. This will mean that the Cathedral will once again have the opportunity to become a prominent architectural anchor in Burlington's downtown and a space of civic significance.

We speak more, below, about the possibilities for St. Paul's to become more visible as both a performing arts space, and a place for civic engagement. Yet neither of those things--nor anything else we might envision as a meaningful use for this building (including worship)--can be possible without the resources necessary to adequately staff, maintain, and sustain the building. The question of how or if we can find ways to invite more people into the building on a weekly basis, exciting though that question may be—and we have found it very exciting—depends on a vision of the Cathedral in which the building itself is very well-resourced and a staff exists to direct and manage the use of the space.

As it stands right now, and given the current funding model for the Cathedral, which depends almost entirely on the pledging of our members, we do not possess the resources ourselves to open our space up to a more public, civic mission.

It is also true, though, that even if we were to decide to function primarily just as a parish church, the “voluntary donation” funding model we currently use is not likely to sustain us in our high-need building very far into the twenty-first century, as [statistics from the Episcopal Church Foundation](#) revealed to us at a meeting we attended with their representatives in October at Rock Point.

Of particular note are these numbers:

- Over the past 10 years, Average Sunday Attendance at Episcopal Churches nationwide has declined by 25%
- The average plate and pledge change nationally went down 0.1% from 2015 to 2016, despite the fact that the inflation rate went up 2.1%
- There is a steady decline in the U.S. in the number of people who define themselves as “religious” (23% in VT and NH)
- Nationally, 1/3 of Episcopal parishes are considered healthy, 1/3 are considered challenged in terms of their sustainability, and 1/3 are on “life support”

The message from ECF was that the purely pledge-based funding model, as well as a model that encourages parishes to be institutions unto themselves, will not sustain us into the 21st century. At almost every juncture in our discussions over the year, we have been aware of this and of the fact that even now we are already asking far too much of the small Cathedral staff, and particularly from our ordained clergy.

Paradoxically, it seems possible that moving toward a **long-term** vision of the Cathedral as *common ground* could lead to a more sustainable future for our *sacred space*, and in no way

detract from our mission to keep the rumor of Christ alive in the world. That vision might consider some of the more public uses for the building itself, but also the possibility that the property on which it sits ([including the parking lot](#)) could potentially be developed as a new source of revenue, revenue that would allow for the continued maintenance of the building, and possibly pay for the personnel necessary to staff a building that, on days other than Sunday, might be used in more and different ways from the way it is used currently. The Urban Cathedral Study Group group grew, in fact, out of a feasibility study that examined the possibility of developing housing on the property that we currently use as our parking lot. All of this is to say that the questions of how we might make better use of our building should clearly include future questions about how we might be able to develop our property as a way to maintain the building.

Related to this, we have learned that many urban churches around the country are taking advantage of their desirable downtown locations to offer their buildings for rental to groups looking for meeting space. Other churches are leveraging the architectural interest of their buildings, their gardens, and, sometimes, their well-equipped kitchens to attract groups interested in renting their space for social events. [Some churches are making much more radical decisions and reimagining their space completely.](#) Those churches are using the income generated from new uses of their physical plant to both maintain their space and help pay for staff who manage and facilitate that space.

Emerging Questions

How can we live more fully into the original vision of the Cathedral as a prominent downtown building?

How can the physical plant of the Cathedral be properly maintained to allow for the sustainability of the building for all purposes?

If the Cathedral building were to be used for more public events, how would we provide the staff and other resources to direct and manage the use of the space?

How might we reimagine a sustainable funding model for the Cathedral, a funding model that didn't depend primarily on annual pledges by members of the parish community?

How might an alternative funding model leverage the physical resource of our building/property and its location downtown? Even more specifically, should we consider development of our property as a vehicle for funding our mission?

III. Cathedrals are Places for the Arts

- Of the many topics we encountered throughout the year in our conversations, the issue of the Cathedral's stewardship of the arts came up again and again. Here are some of the forms that issue took:
- Cathedrals are traditionally spaces where the arts have flourished;
- Our building had been specifically designed with the arts in mind;
- Conversations with parishioners and others made it clear that people strongly associate St. Paul's with extraordinary music;
- Visiting clergy talked about the way a deeper involvement in the arts had enriched their own sacred spaces;
- Burlington musicians and arts organizations rave about our space.

St. Paul's is known in the diocese for having a rich liturgical music culture. St. Paul's has also been the venue for Cathedral Arts, a classical music concert series, for many years. In recent years, however, St. Paul's has been unable to host as many Cathedral Arts events as it did in the past largely because of the challenges such events pose to our limited resources, particularly our staffing resources (setting up for a concert and then cleaning up and resetting the nave for church requires considerable time and effort).

Given the undeniable potential for St. Paul's to function more prominently as a space for the arts in Burlington, however, it seems worth wondering whether we might be able, *sustainably*, to widen and diversify our arts profile, so as to invite a wider variety of people into our space.

Other prominent urban churches, and particularly cathedrals, that we spoke with have arts programs that are understood to be an explicit extension of their ministry. Rather than quietly serving as a concert venue, for instance, they very explicitly draw attention to the fact that the concert is happening within the walls of an urban cathedral as part of that cathedral's outreach ministry to the larger community. They also often use some of the revenue produced by their arts events to support the church itself, as well as sometimes other organizations (benefit concerts, for instance, can provide relief to communities suffering from emergencies).

Emerging Questions

Could opportunities exist for St. Paul's to reimagine itself as a more diverse and vibrant space for the arts in Burlington?

Are there ways to imagine those opportunities in a fully sustainable way? In other words, with a different configuration of resources, could we make the diversification of the arts more sustainable at St. Paul's?

Could we integrate the arts more fully into our missional work, perhaps also realizing some revenue to support our own building as well as benefit people in need?

IV. Cathedrals are Hubs for Social Justice Work and Civic Involvement

It is the role of a cathedral to have a prophetic voice in the community. St. Paul's has a history of fulfilling this role, whether it has been around issues related to marriage equality in Vermont, or very recent issues related to racism in the country. A podcast of Dean Jeanne Finan's sermon following the Charlottesville white supremacist rally in August, 2017, for instance, was shared widely in this country and elsewhere. At a time of increasing political turmoil, especially around issues related to civil and human rights and dignity for all, a more visible St. Paul's is also a prophetic St. Paul's. In this role, we become a unified voice demanding justice and peace that is heard beyond the physical space of the church.

St. Paul's has long been a community that has given its members a foundation and the support to live out their baptismal covenant in working for the dignity for every human being. Without permanently institutionalizing one social justice issue initiative over another, it is a place that allows people with similar social justice concerns to organize, while allowing issues to flow so that we can be responsive to new and emergent needs. It is this support for a diversity of social justice issues that gives St. Paul's a sustaining energy in the fight for justice in our community.

Several of the 88 cathedrals around the country also function importantly as neutral spaces for civil conversation in tumultuous times. This might be a way that we could centralize some of our social justice work while also living into our prophetic role as a Cathedral. Many of the community organizers we spoke with see Saint Paul's as being geographically well-suited to inviting groups to meet in order to create a stronger web of community for Burlington. People from city government spoke about the need for neutral spaces (in other words, not City Hall) for the community to meet to discuss potentially polarizing issues related to social justice. An example we found both intriguing and inspiring is the development of the [Center for Reconciliation](#) housed in the Cathedral of St. John in Providence, RI.

Emerging Questions

Are there ways for St. Paul's to function as a more visible hub for a wide range of issues of social justice?

Are there ways that St. Paul's might become a prominent space for civil discussion in Burlington, a facilitator of necessary conversations and connections that could enhance the health of our community?

V. Cathedrals Nurture Partnerships

The possibilities (and related challenges) of truly reciprocal partnership excited and daunted us throughout the year. We imagined partnerships with community organizations and non-profit businesses, arts, civic and social justice organizations, other faith communities, and for-profit enterprises with missions that are congruent with our own. All deserve further and serious exploration, as they may hold the key to a more sustainable future. We came to appreciate that lay participation at church is changing in the 21st century. Churches of the past could count on the laity to sustain infrastructure and long-term programs. In the future, our members will likely dedicate their time differently. This is true across faiths. Program support will rely on paid staff or innovative partnerships.

Our conversations with community organizations as well as with churches who offer space to non-profits aligned with their mission, made us wonder about the possibility, for example, of forming a partnership with a non-profit that might be of mutual benefit to both organizations. In forming a truly symbiotic relationship with an active arts organization, for instance, we might be able to *sustainably* enhance our mission as a diverse space for the performing arts while also supporting an organization that might not otherwise be able to afford a dramatic venue for the arts.

But there are other ways of thinking about partnerships that seem very much in keeping with the notion of common ground that is at the heart of a cathedral's identity, and that has to do with our relationships with other churches, even other faith communities. A rich and inspiring conversation we had with Rabbi Small of Ohavi Zedek, for instance, as well as the warm hospitality the OZ community offered us when we visited to see their [mural](#), made us wonder whether there are ways in which an urban cathedral might be a space of radical ecumenism—such as we were when we invited the Roman Catholic Bishop to co-preside with our own Bishop at the Taize service during Holy Week earlier this year—and also of meaningful inter-faith relationships as well. We learned, for example, that in the past, St. Paul's and OZ co-sponsored a trip to Israel. Is a project of similar scope worth considering again as we see our world deeply injured by religious extremism?

Emerging Questions

Are there opportunities for St. Paul's to partner with other non-profit organizations in Burlington in ways that might be of mutual economic benefit to both partners as well as a way to enrich the mission of both?

What changes would we be willing to make to become a part of a truly reciprocal partnership?

Are there ways for St. Paul's to partner with other downtown churches and faith communities in pursuit of shared goals?

VI. The Cathedral and Rock Point

It's worth noting that when Mayor Weinberger visited the Cathedral in May and began his comments by saying what he knew about St. Paul's, he mentioned only Rock Point and the Cathedral's involvement in Vermont Interfaith Action. He is almost certainly not alone in associating the Cathedral with Rock Point, but our relationship with that property, which is both a relationship to a place of great natural beauty as well as a relationship with the Diocese, is not nearly as clear as our relationship with VIA.

With the Campaign for Rock Point bringing a sustainable plan to that property, and given its location right down the street from the Cathedral, we have wondered whether there might be a way for us to forge a tighter relationship with Rock Point, the place, as a way of deepening our spiritual connection to the natural world, especially at a time in which we are called every day as Christians to respond to the crisis occasioned by climate change. Our exploration of the Cathedral's relationship to Rock Point, the place, became just a part of a larger conversation we had throughout the year about our role as an environmental steward.

Rock Point is also the home of the Diocese. When he visited with us, Bishop Ely acknowledged the question of the Cathedral's relationship to the Diocese as a persistent one. Although it seemed well beyond our mandate to clarify that relationship, it does seem incumbent upon us in the months ahead to explore the question, particularly as questions of economic sustainability for both the Cathedral and the Diocese become more pressing, and also as we move into a time of transition in the episcopacy of the Diocese. We would recommend that the question of the Cathedral's relationship to the Diocese become a consideration during the discernment process for a new Bishop.

Emerging Questions

Are there ways for us to build a more conscious relationship with Rock Point as a place in which to deepen our relationship to the natural world?

What does it mean to be part of St. Paul's and a Christian at a time of profound climate change?

Might we be able to use the months leading to the installation of a new Bishop as a time also to explore the Cathedral's relationship to the Diocese?

Next Steps and Final Words

We are tremendously blessed with the resources we have at St. Paul's, limited though they are; and we are particularly blessed with the richness of the community that worships in this space. [There is so much that we are doing so well right now.](#) We are *not* a church community that is in crisis.

We are also fortunate in our location in the thriving and evolving downtown of a city in which many of the values we espouse as a community of faith are not incompatible with the values of the community as a whole. It is clear that we can be more visible and relevant in that community *if we wish to* embrace the outward-facing possibilities of our role as an urban cathedral.

And that is a real "if." We function well as a parish community, and that may be the chief identity we wish to have. Indeed, that will be one of the questions any future planning group will have to grapple with, and a conversation that St. Paul's will want to have with the Diocese once a new Bishop is installed.

Yet the challenges of the twenty-first century, including the very real challenges of sustaining *any* faith community (even just a parish) that relies on pledges for its budget, would seem to us to demand that we increase our visibility and relevance in the community by inviting many more people into our space, not necessarily as members of our Sunday morning congregation, but as people who need nonetheless to be fed by the sustenance of God's love for us all.

We support the idea of more fully living into our mission as an urban cathedral--a sacred space and common ground that keeps alive the rumor of God in the world. But it is clear we could not grow into that much more public identity overnight—or even over a year—if for no other reason than that our resources can barely support the work we are doing right now as a thriving parish and sometime cathedral. Though we are not planners, we do know that sustainable growth is always best begun with small steps. And so we conclude with the words of Br. Mark Brown, of the Society of St. John the Evangelist: "When the Kingdom comes in its fullness it will be mostly the triumph of small things. The widow's mite; the boy's five barley loaves and two fish that fed thousands. Even the smallest gestures of kindness, love, compassion, patience, generosity. These are the flags of dawn."