

Urban Cathedral Study Group
Mid-year update (or, How we spent our summer vacation)
September 14, 2017

Cathedrals, the most institutional expression of Anglican life, operate in many ways as church at its most counter-cultural. Like all Christian endeavor, the vocation of cathedrals is to build the kingdom of God, though they do it through more institutional means than most. They create strategies, manage structures and systems, develop skills and styles which enable them to keep alive the rumor of God, whether in the local and regional communities or in the diocese and beyond. At its best a cathedral can, like other institutions, cope with the tensions of a society, measuring those tensions by the rule and light of Christ.

From “Creating Citizens: The Institutional Character of Cathedrals”
June Osborne

The Urban Cathedral Study Group convened in January 2017 with the intention of exploring, not planning, future possibilities for the Cathedral Church of St. Paul. This initiative grew out of two seeds: one came from a study done in 2015-16 in partnership with Cathedral Square Corporation and the Diocese. That study looked specifically at the feasibility of developing the land that is currently being used as our parking lot into a mixed-use building that included a significant number of affordable housing units. Not only did that group discover that such a project was financially *unfeasible*, the committee involved in that study also acknowledged that, setting aside the question of financial resources, pursuing a project of that scope without first exploring whether such a project was in keeping with the Cathedral’s mission, was, at best, short-sighted. The other seed comes from our recognition that Burlington’s downtown is changing around us—significantly—as are the needs of the Burlington community as we live further into the twenty-first century. The question that arises from this changing social and physical landscape—how best can we function as a relevant institution of faith, a true urban cathedral?—would be an urgent one for us even if the question had not come up as part of the earlier feasibility study. And so the Urban Cathedral Study Group was born with the idea that we eschew planning for a year in which we would **study** and **listen**—to thinkers and writers reflecting on some of the great challenges of our time, to deans of cathedrals who wrote about the role of cathedrals, to rectors and deans from other urban churches in the U.S. who had led their congregations through changing and challenging circumstances, to people and planners who envisioned a new cathedral in 1973, when our building was completed, to people working in a variety of contexts in Burlington who could share with us their own perspectives on the needs of the community. Co-chaired by **Paul Van de Graaf** and **Lisa Schnell**, the Study Group consists of **Josh Brown**, the **Very Rev. Jeanne Finan**, **John Rouleau**, **Jenny Sisk**, and **Lee Williams**. With the exception of two Sundays in mid-summer, the Urban Cathedral Study Group has met every week of 2017 so far, and plans to continue to meet weekly for the remainder of the year. We will complete our work in January of 2018 when we present a final report to the parish at the Cathedral’s Annual Meeting.

The reading the study group has done so far has included Sebastian Junger's *Tribe*, a recent series of articles on the role of cathedrals (one of which is quoted above), essays by Wendell Berry ("Christianity and the Survival of Creation") and Fred Bahnson ("The Priest in the Trees"), Peter Block's practical guide, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Barbara Brown Taylor's *An Altar in the World*, *The Great Derangement* by Amitav Ghosh, and Mary Oliver's recent collection of essays, *Upstream*. Those readings have been a mingling of history, information, clear-eyed social and political commentary, hope, and theology that have piqued, inspired, and sustained us over the past months. They have also helped us to identify the questions from which possibility arises and reminded us of the need for openness in our asking of those questions.

Throughout the last eight months, we have worked to share those questions and many of our explorations with the rest of the St. Paul's community. During Lent, we welcomed four guest preachers to the Cathedral, rectors and former rectors of urban congregations who would help us identify the questions we should be asking. Each one of those people preached at the 9:30 service and led a special Adult Forum in the Nave that specifically addressed their experience of what it means to be an urban church. We asked for and received a lot of valuable feedback from the many people who attended those Forums (average attendance was about 50 for those Forums). For several Sundays after Easter, the Adult Forum continued the urban cathedral theme, but with people closer to home. We learned about the history of St. Paul's from the architects who designed the building and from our own parishioners who had been involved in the visioning of both the new Cathedral and Cathedral Square. In May, we welcomed Mayor Miro Weinberger to a chili dinner held in the Parish Hall to which the entire congregation was invited. In addition to hearing from the Mayor about the changes in our downtown, and his thoughts about the role of urban churches in Burlington, the Urban Cathedral group shared a summary of what our guests had taught us during Lent.

The Mayor's visit with us signaled the beginning of the summer phase of the Study Group's work: a collecting of viewpoints regarding the needs of the Burlington community and the role of urban churches from (mainly) outside the St. Paul's parish. We spoke with prominent people from city government, the Burlington arts community, the nonprofit/social justice sector, the higher education community, the other downtown congregations, and folks from churches outside of Vermont.

As we reflect on these conversations, and identify the themes and trends that collect around them as well as connect them to what we learned in the first half of the year, we welcome the valuable engagement of the entire St. Paul's community once again. Here, a little beyond the halfway point in our study, we invite you to read this collection of our findings so far and to be present at an Adult Forum on September 24 and/or October 1 respectively (10-11 in the Commons Room), or at an evening session on Thursday, October 5 at 6PM in the Commons Room. We hope at those gatherings, people will provide their own questions and reflections for us to take with us into the last part of our exploration.

Our Lenten Guests and The Questions They Asked

The Rev. Kevin Johnson

Rector, St. Albans, Arlington, TX

- Who *are* we? (vs. what do we do?)
- How do people find us?
- How much of our identity is tied up in this building?
 - Is the building distracting us from our mission?
 - Could we be using the building differently?
- Who do our neighbors say we are?
- What are our stories? And how do we share them with each other?
- Are there ways we might be able to think of partnerships with other non-profits?

The Rev. Anne Bonnyman

Retired Rector, Trinity Church, Copley Square, Boston MA

- How do we understand **relationship** and **collaboration**?
- How can we connect with our neighbors? Who will be our guides?
- How does it matter to Burlington that St. Paul's is part of the community?
- Are we willing to be transformed ourselves?
- Are we willing to take risks and make mistakes?
- Have we ever thought in terms of unchurched communities?

The Rev. Brian Cole

Rector, Good Shepherd, Lexington KY (now Bishop, Diocese of East Tennessee)

- How do we understand "place" at St. Paul's?
- How do our neighbors see us? Do they see us at all?
- Do people understand that we are a safe space? How would they know this?
- How might we feed the lonely with events other than just church?
- How might we think of our downtown cathedral as ministering to transients, i.e. tourists?

The Very Rev. Gail Greenwell

Dean, Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, OH

- What is the role of a cathedral?
- Where is the cathedral other than in this building?
- How can the cathedral be relevant in the public space of a city?
- How might we shift our focus from membership to **welcome**?
- What does it mean to practice an "economics of compassion"?

The Mayor's Visit

Mayor Miro Weinberger visited the Cathedral on May 5, 2017. We put two main questions to him:

Question #1: What will downtown look like?

- * downtown becoming more vibrant, and mixed-use
 - buildings will become higher

- zoning will become much more prescriptive with regard to design and detail
- * he expects that there will be many fewer automobiles downtown (in the city as a whole) in the future
 - more bikes
 - more ride-sourcing services like Uber
 - driverless cars
 - he suggested this could have an effect on how we think about our parking lot
- * greatstreetsBTV.com shows plans for reduction of asphalt, more green infrastructure
 - there is a plan to convert Cherry Street into a much more vibrant thoroughfare to the lake
 - this could have an effect on how much exposure we have

Question #2: What does he understand might be the church's role in BTV? How does he see us?

- * land use and housing in particular
 - aware of the work VIA is doing re: morality and equality around affordable housing issues
- * Rock Point
 - he would like to promote greater public use of that property
- * gun violence
 - he sees the church as a critical moral voice on this issue
- * opioid crisis
 - he was emphatic about the seriousness of this crisis
 - doesn't think that churches have been engaged enough with this issue

Summer Conversations

Most of our summer conversations were structured by the following questions:

1. What role do communities of faith play in the lives of people in the Burlington area?
2. Are there communities of faith, or particular programs, activities, connections, that really stand out for you?
3. You are part of _____. Can you tell me what most excites you about your work? What most concerns you?
4. What excites/concerns you about the future of this community in general? (What do you see as the "drivers of change" or most significant issues in this community?)
5. Are there opportunities for partnership between St. Paul's and _____ that you think might address those concerns or tap into that excitement? Or are there partnerships you've already developed that are particularly interesting or significant?

Civic Issues

Paul Van de Graaf spoke with four other people connected to changes in downtown Burlington: **Liz Miller**, a prominent lawyer who represented Don Sinex in his effort to develop the new Town Center, **David White**, the head of Burlington's city planning office, **Noelle MacKay**, the head of the city's Community and Economic Development Office, and the Burlington Police Chief, **Brandon del Pozo**. It was clear from these conversations how much change is occurring

in downtown Burlington. In the near future, Cherry Street should continue its transformation into a dynamic avenue connecting the Church Street corridor to the waterfront. Indeed, the city hopes to add a more direct connection from the intersection of Cherry Street and Battery Street to the waterfront. One of the most significant needs heard in these conversations is increased housing in downtown. Housing in downtown helps with the sustainability and vibrancy of Burlington. The city hopes to change the zoning and development rules so that development is not stymied. Another important aspect of housing is the availability of housing for low income and even moderate income folks, particularly our seniors. Paul heard about how VIA is influencing the conversation on this issue. Another challenge Paul heard was the decrease in civility in the life of the city and in the way city officials interact with the community. We appear to have lost fruitful and timely opportunities to communicate about important issues in productive ways. St. Paul's stands at a central and safe location where new conversations might take place. Paul learned about the need for city meeting places and about the efforts to address the opiate crisis through enforcement, treatment, and prevention. We could find ways to educate ourselves about how opiate addiction affects our friends and neighbors.

As a group, we also met on August 24th with the Chair of the Burlington City Council, **Jane Knodell**. Jane reiterated many of the issues that the Mayor had raised and that Paul heard from the people he spoke with. Jane shared information about a new housing development being built (70 units) on the Bove's lot that will increase the population of downtown residents in the neighborhood immediately adjacent to the Cathedral on Pearl Street. She talked at some length about the Cherry Street renovation, which she said would be complete in about three years. For Jane, the most pressing issues in downtown Burlington are poverty & income inequality, discrimination, and civic disruption. Echoing some of what Paul heard, she also spoke about what she perceives to be a general erosion in civil discourse in town, and wondered whether the churches might be able to serve as sites for difficult civil conversations.

John Rouleau met with three people also as part of our civic exploration: **Kesha Ram**, long time Burlington City employee and former member of the State Legislature, **Janet Hunt** from the Area Agency on Aging and **Ali Dieng**, Burlington Home School Coordinator and recently elected to the Burlington City Council. All three were generous with their time and their ideas. The main theme that they all had in common was building greater capacity for community by strengthening ties and communication between the varied groups in the city. They talked about New Americans, low-income people, our varied faith communities, tourists, and the elderly. They see Saint Paul's as being geographically well suited to inviting groups to meet and create a stronger web of community for Burlington.

In July, the entire group met with **Raquel Aronhime**. Raquel is a member of the St. Paul's community, but we met with her in her capacity as a Community Impact Manager for the United Way of Northwest Vermont. Raquel talked about the three focuses of the work the United Way does: health, education, and income. She impressed upon us the fact that, though many people think of the United Way primarily as a funding agency, it does everything in true *partnership*. Because the issue of partnerships has come up again and again in our conversations, we talked at length about the nature of the relationship the UW has with its funded partners.

The Arts Community

The study group met with **Michael Dabroski**, the organizer of the Vermont Mozart Festival, at one of our regular Thursday morning meetings. After this, Jenny Sisk met with the following people: **Madeline Bell** (Programming Director) and **Jessica Handrik** (Director of Education) at the Flynn; **Amy Cunningham**, Director of Community Programs for the Vermont Humanities Council; **Kiersten Williams**, Community Programs Coordinator for Burlington City Arts; **Adam Brooks**, Executive Director of SEABA; and **Heidi Swevens**, Volunteer Coordinator and Adult Program Manager for VSA Vermont. Three themes emerged from these conversations: collaboration, inclusivity, and relevance. First, all of these people emphasized the essential role of creative partnerships, the pooling of resources, and collaboration among different groups and organizations in the arts world in Burlington today. The most exciting things that are happening involve two or more groups working together. Second, for all of the people interviewed, art matters because it has the potential to cut across divisions in society and reach lots of different people. For this reason, they emphasized the importance of making arts events as accessible to possible. Third, each of the people interviewed sees the usefulness of art extending well beyond the aesthetic experience. They offered many examples of art events raising consciousness of or even funds for issues of contemporary concern in our community, and they suggested that attendance at art events rises when art is seen as having that sort of extra relevance. How might asking questions about collaboration, inclusivity, and relevance help shape the future of our Cathedral Arts ministry?

Other Clergy and Churches

Lee Williams and Josh Brown spoke with **Rev. Laura Engelken** (UVM Interfaith Center) and **Sister Pat McKittrick**, a nun from Winooski. These were very rich conversations about the spiritual longings and needs of the people Laura and Sister Pat encounter. Both of them stressed that people are hungry for community and meaning. What many are looking for is a safe space where they can genuinely ask “Who is God for *me*?” But they both recognize that people don’t necessarily want to ask that question in the setting of organized religion. Both wondered whether it might be the role of an urban cathedral to facilitate this kind of conversation. Laura was especially aware that faith communities can provide opportunities for interactions between generations, something that is often missing in our society. But she wondered how to make the schedule and offerings meet today’s needs? Many people—students, young parents—are simply not going to become regular Sunday-morning churchgoers even if they have grown up in that tradition. They asked: What do we have to offer those who don’t come to church on Sunday? We can’t expect people to always come to us, so how do we go out to them? How do you bring what is inside out? What “visible drama” not just words, do we use to reach out? Both women stressed interfaith activity and outreach. “God is the same everywhere, just comes in different clothes,” said Sister Pat, who also believes that we need better education around different religions and traditions. Sister Pat reflected on the fear that often exists in faith communities to give up programs and services that have run their natural course. It’s important, she stressed, for faith communities to decide on a few key priorities. And echoing our very first Lenten preacher, she also said that faith communities need to be “grounded” and seek out who they authentically are. That includes “own[ing] our own prejudices.”

Lisa Schnell had telephone conversations with people at three urban churches elsewhere in the country: **Susan Sutton** (St. Gregory of Nyssa, San Francisco); the **Rev. Scott White** (Trinity Episcopal, Asheville NC); the **Rev. Canon Linda Grenz**, Canon to the Ordinary, Diocese of Rhode Island. She asked them two open-ended questions:

1. Are there ways that your parish has changed as a result of things that have changed around you in the city?
2. What about your urban setting “identifies” you?

A phrase used by Linda Grenz sums up the theme of these three conversations. She said that the Diocese of Rhode Island is “opening all doors of the Cathedral so that people can come in through whatever door is comfortable.” Scott White similarly spoke of Trinity becoming a “ministry site” (as opposed to simply a parish) in the city of Asheville. In every case, these folks were focused on making their building an intersection of the faith community and the secular community. Typically, that involved forming various kinds of partnerships with non-profits (sometimes involving that group’s regular use of space in the church building). It could also involve revenue-generating relationships with for-profit and private organizations/individuals (usually in the form of space rentals). St. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, has quite a lucrative wedding business; Trinity Asheville frequently rents out their space for meetings and conferences. The Cathedral of St. John in Rhode Island, which no longer houses a congregation, has become a Center for Reconciliation and focusses on interracial reconciliation through education and the arts. The Diocese is housed there, and they share their office wing with a social justice organization working with teenagers. All three people talked about shifting the focus of membership in urban churches from “active members” to “event members”—people who come to the church for events such as concerts or speakers (and who might eventually find themselves coming back for worship).

Next Steps

As well as the three feedback sessions we have scheduled for the St. Paul’s community—September 24 and October 1 at 10AM, and 6PM on Thursday, October 5—we will also be meeting with the Cathedral vestry, staff, the Jubilee cluster, and the Bishop before the end of October to hear their responses to what we have collected so far. We also have an October conversation scheduled with Rabbi Amy Small, of Ohavi Zedek.

In order to collect as much feedback from the congregation as possible, there will, in addition, be a bulletin board at the back of the Narthex from September 24th until October 8th where people can post their comments. And we will also be happy to hear from folks on our email address: urbancathedralvt@gmail.com.

We expect to spend November and December digesting, distilling, and organizing what we’ve collected into a final report that we expect to make available to the congregation two weeks before we present it at the January 2018 Annual Meeting.

We are grateful to you for taking the time to read this update, and we very much look forward to your feedback on what you’ve read.