

## **Summary of Cottage Meetings**

Saint John's Episcopal Church, Bangor, Maine

In March and April of 2017, St. John's held a series of eleven Cottage Meetings as a way of bringing small groups of parishioners together to stimulate ideas and share thoughts about our dreams for the church and, through sharing, to listen to where God is calling us as a church. This document summarizes the observations of parishioners at these eleven meetings.

These meetings were part of the Discernment phase of the Capital Campaign, to determine whether the parish should proceed to the Feasibility Study phase. Over 70 people took part in this process, including 10 hosts who provided refreshments and meeting space, and 8 discussion facilitators who were coached in the process by Leslie Pendleton, the Episcopal Church Foundation consultant engaged by the Vestry to lead us through the Discernment phase.

The level of participation in the meetings and the ideas brought forward indicate sufficient interest in capital projects to justify a feasibility study for a capital campaign

### **What We Do Well**

Participants in the Cottage Meetings were asked what we St. John's do well. The general themes that emerged in the responses to this question can be grouped into the areas of, in no particular order: Liturgy and Worship; Music; Pastoral Care; Outreach and Feeding Ministries; Worship Setting; Sharing our Facilities; Community and People; and Youth. Values we found central to St. John's identity had to do with community, family, and offering a sense of warmth, beauty, and home.

### **What Might We Do Better? What Are Our Challenges? Who Do We Want to Become?**

Examination of what we find challenging or burdensome brought forth ideas about steps we might take to align our facilities and programming with who we are and want to be as a parish. These ideas centered on a number of different themes. Those include, in no special order:

#### Liturgy and Worship

Chiefly, we wish to reach out to new people and new generations by offering a variety of worship services and by reducing barriers to understanding and participating in them.

#### Buildings – the Church and its rooms, the grounds, and the Parish House

Parishioners expressed concern about our buildings. Many or most meeting participants view our buildings as not representing optimally who we are or wish to be; participants also feel that our buildings are not optimal for our current needs and are not equal to the task of realizing the future participants spoke of during Cottage Meetings.

While the Church, in particular, is deeply cherished, people also described this building as expensive, outdated, worn, underused, or used inefficiently. The worship space is beautiful, but

it is also uncomfortable and can be intimidating. Participants see a contradiction between a grand Nave and an underwhelming Undercroft. Many suggestions centered on updating and refreshing the interior of the Church; making the Undercroft and other rooms more functional, versatile and inviting; and ensuring that our spaces are clean, safe, pleasant, and easy to navigate. Maintaining the Church is expensive, and an outlying opinion exists that we can no longer maintain the Church at all and should divest ourselves of all our properties.

We would like to add beauty, appeal, and spiritual richness to our Church grounds. Participants spoke of the memorial garden and the possibility of a labyrinth.

A variety of ideas came forward about optimizing or repurposing our Parish House space, to make it more productive in serving our ministries. A minority opinion prefers to sell the Parish House, which would necessitate buying another property or moving the Parish House's functions (office space, Sunday School, AI-Anon and AA, and so on) into the Undercroft. The Capital Campaign will need to address the need to maintain these services while the Parish House structure is in need of significant repair.

Generally, we seek a cost-aware balance between an appreciation of our aesthetic and historic value (including the stained glass windows) and a desire for functionality appropriate to the needs and ministries of a modern urban church. We must prioritize our structures and plan for their ongoing maintenance.

#### Outreach and Community

Participants envision a church that is out in the community – sharing resources, fostering relationships, providing spaces, services, and events for our neighbors, and making sure we are communicating widely and effectively.

#### Inreach

We want to improve communication and personal connection among parishioners. This could mean offering additional and more varied fellowship opportunities that encourage us to share of ourselves and get to know one another.

#### Children and Youth

The chief theme that emerged from the youth was variety and interactivity. We want to offer activities and formation that engage and involve youth in worship and in the parish community, helping them to stay spiritually connected as they grow older.

#### Christian Formation and Spiritual Life

We seek creative opportunities for adults to wrestle together with scripture or life issues. Questions were raised about the impact and attendance of current offerings. We welcome opportunities to gather together in small groups and retreats.

#### Parish Growth and Newcomers

Our sense is that we must be reaching out, going where the people are and “sowing the seeds.” We will need to grapple with how to appeal to the unchurched, which could include researching and understanding what they want and need from church. We note that we are part of a diverse community and our growth is tied to the patterns of growth in the surrounding community. Additionally, our overall patterns of behavior should be welcoming, and we should engage newcomers.

#### Church Administration and Finances

Concerns centered on planning for the future; transparency; and making best use of the resources that we already have, including knowledge and skills.

#### Music

We would like a wider range of musical expression and participation; youth particularly voiced this interest. Hosting musical events draws in funds and brings us recognition by engaging the wider community.

#### **Next Steps**

With gratitude to the participants, hosts, and facilitators of the Cottage Meetings, and drawing upon the views expressed at those meetings, the Vestry is working to identify specific Capital Campaign projects that will help us to become the church that parishioners have envisioned. These projects will be described in a forthcoming letter from the Vestry to the parish, after which the cost of these projects will be assessed and a Feasibility Study will be conducted.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Vestry,  
Sarah Danser and Ben Treat  
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