

**St. Mark's Vestry Meeting
November 27, 2023**

Present:

Rev. Aileen DiBenedetto, Rector
James Normington, Senior Warden
Stuart Paul, Junior Warden
Frank Ruggiero, Treasurer
Rebecca Ethier, Clerk
Brenda Cole-Milner
Laurie Voedisch
Dayna Hume
Brenda Matthews
John Mentzer
Cathy Chipolone-Collins
Jean Robertson

Absent:

Stephanie Powers

Learning

Deferred to next meeting

Information

Review of October Vestry Minutes

A motion was made by Jean to accept the October Vestry minutes as drafted; Frank seconded. All voted in favor.

Senior Warden's Report

James submitted a grant application for the October organ concert and received a \$500 grant from Leominster Credit Union (LCU). James and Laurie have been talking about getting grant money for the kitchen supplies and along with John and Chris for the Community Café. LCU will not give a grant to churches directly but will support community projects that churches do. James will combine a grant request for both for kitchen supplies and the community café.

There was a question about the cost per week to run the community café: John indicated there is a cost of providing the baked goods that are sold which is about \$40/week.

James led morning prayer at yesterday's Sunday services. James thanked everyone who participated in the Christmas Bazaar.

There was a great Thanksgiving Evensong with Christ Church. Robert did a great job with music and the event was funded by a sponsor. The above-mentioned LCU grant was for the October organ concert. If we continue to get grant funding, then we may consider doing more concerts. Frank noted that the LCU check was not cashed because it was made out strangely so they are working to get that straightened out.

Stu ran the 8am service yesterday for morning prayer.

Buildings & Grounds

Terry, Bob, and Stu put up the storm windows in the Rectory. For the lift repair, Stu needs to contact the Architectural Access Board of Massachusetts to review. Stu noted that after the Bazaar, the ventilation window in the kitchen was left open. The de-leading inside of the Rectory is complete and got approved, but we are just waiting for the inspector. In the Spring they will do the outside. After that, we will discuss the windows and what want/need to be replaced. We don't need to have the outside done before we rent out the rectory, but we would have to stipulate that the windows have to remain closed until the de-leading is complete. The contractor has been paid in full except for outside work remaining to be done. The expense for exterior may exceed the quote if the site gets worse before spring.

Rector's Report

Rev. Aileen noted Moments of gratitude:

Thanks to the chairs of the Christmas Bazaar: Laurie, Joy, Libby and Dayna.

Thanks to Dayna for the wreaths and for the community day putting them together.

Thanks to Stu and Joan for setting up the hall.

Thanks to Bob Young for handling the money at the Bazaar.

Thanks to Terry DellaSanta for all of her behind the scenes work for the Bazaar.

Thanks to everyone who attended.

Thanks to Brenda Cole-Milner for leading the de-leading at the Rectory.

Thanks to Stu and James for leading morning prayer this month.

Thanks to Fr. Will and Rev. Laura as backup supply when Rev. Aileen was on vacation.

Thanks to Christine Downing for volunteering at services.

Thanks to John for starting up the community café.

Administration matters: Rev. Aileen has spoken to John Hansen who is willing to stay on as our organist and is willing to work with a choir. Rev. Aileen will work with Frank to come up with a Letter of Understanding with John so the Vestry understands what expectations are for the role regarding responsibilities and pay. There was a question about what is happening with rectory and when can we rent it? Rev. Aileen noted that there is concern from the Executive Committee about moving forward on renting re: windows that don't stay open, and that door that would need to remain closed or sealed. The conversation will move to the Property Committee.

Services: Moving into Advent, Rev. Aileen noted that Christmas Eve is Sunday, Dec 24. Aileen has a small liturgical team for the season. There have been conversations held with Robert at Christ Church to hold more Evensongs. In general we are going to try to do more with other Episcopal churches.

Following Christmas, we are moving worship back to parish hall because of the lift. The original expectation during the summer was that worship in the Parish Hall would be temporary until the lift was fixed, but it is taking longer than expected. We will strive to make it more of a worship space for the winter. The goal is to be upstairs, but the lift is a real issue as services are not accessible. Stu and Rev. Aileen have a plan for altar rail, kneelers, etc. to make it more of a worship space. We will still have coffee hour in the back after the 10am service. Church school is to be in the rectory as it has now been de-leaded and it is close by. It will also save us some money and be greener because we are not heating

upstairs. Maybe we can still do 1 10am service per month upstairs upon advance notice. John will play the piano downstairs. Discussion followed regarding the moving of services downstairs and various options.

The Christmas pageant will be at 5pm on Christmas Eve along with Eucharist. The Deanery is hosting Blue Christmas services: Northern and Southern. Ours is in Fitchburg at Christ Church on December 17 at 5pm (not a eucharist). Blue Christmas is for those struggling. Laurie said there will be no Sunday School on Dec 17.

Treasurer's Report

As of end of October, pledge payments are still below what we were expecting but have stabilized a bit. We are still \$8,000 behind where we budgeted. The Fundraising revenue picked up after the cookbooks were paid for. For the advertising revenue, we are still waiting for end of the year payment. Frank noted that if we could collect it more mid-year in 2024 that would be easier for budgeting. For expenses, we are pretty good and mostly under budget except for the lift and rectory expenses. We treaded water in October as the deficit did not get any bigger. Also in November we will have bazaar proceeds so that will help. December has 5 Sundays plus Christmas so that will help with collections. John had separately asked Frank if the community café can be broken out from Thrift Shop line; Frank agreed, but are we considering it as part of the 10% for camp funds? Frank is assuming that, but let him know if we want to change that.

There is an Amplify billing issue in that they are billing us \$750/month and pulling it directly from our account. Originally was supposed to \$750 for training, etc. up front but not monthly. We need \$1500 returned. Rev. Aileen noted that she was told that \$750 has been refunded but we still need an additional \$750 returned.

There was a question before the meeting from Cathy on the balance sheet. What are the "deferred expenses" and "deferred income" lines? Frank noted that "deferred income" is the check from the Beacon of Hope at the beginning of year or the end of the previous year for the following year and then gets prorated over the next months. The "deferred expense" line is similar with our property insurance, but deducted from the budget each month even though we are billed quarterly. Frank will try to fix that in 2024 so we don't account for it as an accrual but as cash as we receive it.

Frank stated that there are 5 accounts which make up our operating cash: LCU checking, general funds, and rainy day and Digital Credit Union (DCU) checking and general funds. The balances of all 5 total approximately \$13,000 after paying for the de-leading. Cash will be a constraint on next year's budget. After that \$13,000 is gone, from where are we going to get our cash? This is the most important thing to be tracking over the next couple of months.

Discussion

Vestry Resignation

Libby Moore resigned from Vestry via email on October 17. Her term was up in January anyway so does not need to be filled until the next election.

2024 Budget

Frank indicated that the 2024 pledges that have come in were 14 pledges for approximately \$40,000. He does not have information as to what was collected over the last week. Of those gathered so far, 6 increased, 7 were even and there was 1 new one. More pledges need to be submitted. Pledge number is a big component on the budget. Some of the members who left made reasonably large-sized pledges. If we meet last year's numbers it will be a successful drive but still put us in a difficult spot due to our deficit. It's hard to work on the 2024 budget without pledge numbers. James indicated that he and Aileen will be meeting to track down missing pledges. Stu and Frank agreed to help with it.

Other items on the budget: The diocese assessment is about \$2,000 less for 2024 than 2023. For salaries, it will be tough to give raises this year; we may need to consider holding the line. For Administration, we can save some on the

bookkeeping that we are no longer paying. Some of these savings will go towards paying for Amplify. The Christian Education budget for 2024 of \$700 was already provided by Laurie, which is not an unreasonable number.

The maintenance line will need to be increased due to the ongoing exterminator contract. There will be some savings in having services downstairs in winter and saving on heat. We will need agreement on salaries for next year and approval on Christian Education budget and everything else will be based on historical figures. In 2023, we undertook year or longer contracts for the exterminator, Amplify and the Sunday School subscription. These were investments for us to move forward, but we need to be prudent on choices over the next 12 months to get us over this hump.

Rectory budget calculations: Estimated \$2500/month for rental. Real estate taxes will be around \$538/month. We will need a maintenance fund so we can fix things as they come up. Brenda Cole-Milner suggested using 1-3% of market value for maintenance which comes to \$358-\$1075/month. We will probably go with about 1.5-2% based on the age of the building. The Property Committee should come back with a recommendation on that. We also need to account for repayment of loans from Trust funds for the windows and de-leading. The amount will depend upon how long we want to take to pay it back. It can range from \$155 - \$466/month. Also keep in mind that the property values are increasing so this will impact the other lines. We also need to account for a rental agent fee equal to 1 month's rent paid by the owner/us (potentially). We will have some savings on utilities for rectory with renters paying them which will be approximately \$200/month from 2023 budget. After all these are taken into account, the income from rectory will vary between \$413-1,441/month.

The Fundraising line will be left to Vestry to decide. We should sketch what we would get from each event (yard sale, craft fair, etc.) We should try to do it that way this year rather than just plug in a number.

The Vestry should come up with calendar in order to develop the fundraising number to plan for the year ahead. This will be added to the Vestry agenda for next month. Also we should get the Property Committee's recommendation for maintenance and more get definitive about the Rental Agent Fee. Frank was asked if we can we break down the amounts for historical fundraisers for reference? Frank will try to get this information from the past few years.

Christmas Bazaar

The great weather and changing the dates worked out for the Christmas Bazaar as we were able to have Beacon on Friday night and people from the community on Saturday. We exceeded on Saturday what we got on Friday. The baked goods pretty much sold out. We did pretty well in the kitchen. Total made was about \$4,500 which was the highest since 2018. The highest ever was \$4,700 according to what Frank found in the records. Mark Bodanza did donate to us a percentage of the proceeds of the books he sold.

Laurie noted that she has been on the Bazaar committee for the last few years and will not be able to be part of the committee in 2024. She noted that maybe we consider changing Saturday hours to start around 11 as it was very slow on Saturday morning? Breakfast items were added to the snack bar with limited success.

Current Fundraising: A Second Look

John wanted to invite everyone to think about what we are doing for fundraising and how we may improve upon it. We put a lot of effort into fund raising events but never go back and re-evaluate how they did and if they were a good use of the resources available. We have limited resources, so are people being used in a way that we can maximize value? We should evaluate how events are doing. We should take care of problems that are identified and make things better as we go along. The proposed calendar of fundraising events will help. Consider ways to make events more welcoming, for example we can put a welcome from St. Mark's in the shopping bag at Thrift Shop. Brenda Cole-Milner suggested

visiting St. John's in Athol to see their Thrift Shop. Their donation box is only open at certain times. They also use a separate Facebook page to say what's for sale and they use a little more marketing.

The Fundraising calendar is a good idea so we can get buy-in from other people. We may have gotten off track based on 130 anniversary and suggestions from congregation. We can ask the congregation for fundraiser ideas but it's important to get buy-in to help carry them out.

Parish Dinner

John was approached by a parishioner about parish dinners. Could the idea be brought for the Vestry? What type of dinner should we do and what's an appropriate time to fit in scheduling? It was suggested to have a Shrove Tuesday pancake dinner. Those used to be done at All Saints. Maybe do something for January 6 for the feast of the Epiphany? Maybe a midday dinner so it will be over before it gets dark? Maybe consider a brunch instead of dinner? We also need to remember that we will be having services set up in the hall in the winter. Maybe the week that we go upstairs and we can a breakfast in between services?

Dayna suggested that we think about it and email around ideas to be discussed at the next meeting.

December Meeting/Annual Meeting

We usually have the December Vestry meeting at a restaurant and we don't discuss much business, but we need to meet next month. The next meeting will be Monday, December 18 – get pizzas and start 6:30 so we can eat first. The nominating committee and annual awards should be discussed as an agenda item.

The Annual Meeting date was discussed as Frank will be away during some time in January and February and he should be there. Discussion ensued and it was decided that February 11 will be the date for the Annual meeting with a snow date of February 18.

Licenses

We will move this discussion to the December meeting due to time constraints.

Property Committee

Frank asked who is on the Property Committee? Frank said he would be willing to part of it. Brenda Cole-Milner has agreed to lead it. Frank and Stu have agreed to be members. The Property Committee needs to discuss beyond the rectory so anyone with knowledge and experience would be helpful. Sara Gammell may have knowledge and Laurie will ask her if she is interested. The Property Committee should watch over what needs to be taken care of, what the next projects need to be, prioritizing them, and bringing them to the Vestry. The Property Committee should make recommendations and handle property management. Examples are deciding things like the percentage for the reserve fund and when the rectory will be ready to rent, etc. There should be regular meetings either monthly or bi-monthly.

Safe Church Policy Status

What is the status of the safe church policy? James indicated that the diocese policy was pretty basic and we need to expand upon it. James, Stu, Stephanie and Laurie are on the committee. There is a diocese requirement that we have the policy in place. A policy should be ready for a vote by the annual meeting (for the "bridge" policy.)

The policy will cover things such as background checks for volunteers and what is the appropriate conduct if we find out that there is someone attending services who is registered.

Amplify Tracking

Frank has been able to get the deposit information from Amplify and can trace to where they came from. He does need to tease out the fees they charge and how they charge them. The pledge tracking that was previously done on a spreadsheet now will be done in Amplify. Jeanie Storrs still tracks the pledges by envelopes and creates the letters. Frank will now have to download the information and provide it to Jeanie, but need to figure out how Jeanie will do the tracking this year. Jean and Bob Young will have to work together to figure it out.

If parishioners direct deposit pledges into the church's bank account it saves fees.

Snow Plowing

James provided the snow plowing rates to the Executive Committee. There has been 5% increase in rates from last year. We would pay by storm at the following rate sheet for 2023-2024: \$260 for (1-3"); \$390 for 3-5"; \$470 6-12"; \$595 12-18"; \$675 18-23"; \$840 24+". These prices include salt and complete plowing. Additional salt applications are \$100 per application; Snow removal (hauling) of piles from church parking lot will be charged at \$150 per hour for heavy equipment and trucking. Frank will take last year's budget number of \$4,000 and add 5%.

Brenda Cole-Milner moved to approve new rate sheet; Brenda Matthews seconded; all voted in favor.

Decision

Treasurer's Report Vote

James moved to accept the Treasurer's report, Laurie seconded. All voted in favor.

Closing Prayer

Rev. Aileen offered a closing prayer.

Meeting Adjourned

Laurie made a motion to adjourn and Frank seconded. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 9:05 pm.

Next Meeting

The next Vestry meeting is scheduled for Monday, December 18, 2023 at 6:30 for a working dinner.