

1241 Crawford Drive  
Billings, Montana 59102

April 24, 2023

Members of the Saint Stephen's Community,

We write today to convey what was discussed and decided at the special meeting of the congregation following worship yesterday, Sunday, April 23, 2023. This meeting was announced following the monthly meeting of our church's vestry on Sunday, March 19, 2023.

The vestry of Saint Stephen's has long been aware that our financial situation is dire. Over the past several years we have done work on stewardship and explored the possibility of collaborating in some way with Saint Luke's. However, over time it became clear to us and to our very supportive bishop that Saint Stephen's and Saint Luke's are two very different communities, and that full collaboration or unification is not in the best interests of either community. Therefore, we began exploring how we can best serve our community while also being mindful of our resources.

In September 2022, Father Stephen announced that he would go part-time in order to reduce the financial impact on the congregation. That reduced the annual expenses of our congregation by approximately \$30,000. Father Stephen began working reduced hours at the beginning of this February; however, that was only a temporary fix to a long-term problem.

At the February 22, 2023 meeting of the vestry, our Senior Warden, Steve Gerstner, pointed out that we need to make some serious decisions soon. Following that meeting a dormant task force was reactivated and on February 28, 2023 it met. The Building Use Task Force (members being George Kimmet, Carol Moore, Doris Gerstner, and Father Stephen) met to discuss how the congregation utilizes our building and possible options going forward. The three viable options that the group considered were:

- Finding other congregations interested in using our space with us and paying significant amounts of money to do so
- Working with a developer who would build housing on our site and have the worship space on the first floor
- Selling the property and not replacing it in the near term, instead worshipping and working out of rental space and/or other arrangements

Within thirty minutes of beginning discussions, it was clear to a majority of the Task Force that our facility and the financial obligations it carries was the issue. We spend approximately \$40,000 a year in utilities, property insurance, and maintenance. That is not sustainable. For 2023 our projected income from

pledges is only \$52,000. Therefore, the Task Force moved to recommend sale of the property to the vestry.

Following that meeting, Father Stephen informed Bishop Marty, because the diocese is the true owner of our property. She was supportive and provided guidance. The vestry met on Sunday, March 19, 2023, and the proposal from the Task Force was discussed. Overall, the vestry members were excited about the possibilities for ministry that being freed from the financial and emotional burden of the building could bring. The group voted to move forward with next steps. It was agreed that the next step would be a congregational meeting, which was held yesterday.

At our meeting yesterday we had twenty members and eligible voters of the congregation present. We held a lengthy discussion, and it was emotional. Doris Gerstner, our Junior Warden and Treasurer, outlined our current financial situation as she would at a regular meeting of the vestry. Then Father Stephen led a discussion about why we come to Saint Stephen's, following the model that Bishop Marty laid out in a meeting with our wardens a few months ago. Finally, our Senior Warden, Steve Gerstner, talked about where we are now and next steps. In the end the members present were supportive of moving forward with a possible sale.

We know that this isn't an easy topic or discussion. It is not one we have entered into lightly. However, we are committed to continuing to be a worshipping community that seeks and serves Christ in all people. Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church is a group of followers of Christ, it is not a building or an address. We feel that this is best accomplished without the obligations that being responsible for our current building.

Nothing is happening immediately. This will be a long process. However, we believe that transparency is very important and so that is why we held our meeting yesterday and why this letter is being sent. Father Stephen, with the support of the Bishop, is also going to be attending a conference on Redeveloping Episcopal Congregations in May – we are not the only ones facing such challenges and opportunities.

For now, we ask for your continued prayers for our community, your continued involvement and engagement during this transition time, and your ideas and suggestions. Please do not hesitate to reach out to the vestry, wardens, or Father Stephen. We are all in this together and need to support one another. We close now with a prayer that we have prayed for many weeks now, a prayer for the congregation:

Almighty and everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Lovingly Yours in Christ,

The Wardens and Rector of Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church