

1241 Crawford Drive
Billings, Montana 59102

August 25, 2023

Members of the Saint Stephen's Community,

We write today to update all of you on the status of events at Saint Stephen's. We waited until now to provide an update because we wanted several concrete steps to have been accomplished before updating you.

In April, we held a parish meeting to discuss the financial situation of the congregation and discuss our future together. It was a very productive meeting and there was unanimous support for moving forward with a potential sale of our property. The day after the meeting a letter to the congregation was sent out informing all of you of these events.

Since that meeting, the vestry and others have been hard at work on a number of fronts. In May, we reached out to the Diocese for clarification about what kind of appraisal was needed before it would approve any possible sale. This took a bit of time because this is the first time in our Diocese that a congregation has been looking to sell its property while still continuing to function as a congregation. Eventually we got clarity from the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Montana, which allowed us to move on to the next stages.

As most of you know our wonderful bishop, Bishop Marty, came to Saint Stephen's on June 11 for her annual visitation. The night before the vestry met with her over dinner to discuss our future and next steps. It was a very helpful discussion which helped to highlight many of the next steps. The bishop, as always, was very supportive, encouraging, and pastoral.

In June, the Building Task Force met to discuss next steps. The members agreed to contact to three different commercial real estate firms to seek proposals. Three firms were contacted, and information was received by the deadline of July 31. The Task Force then met in early August to review the results and narrow down our recommendations. All three were good options, but the group was able to agree to recommend one to the vestry. At the August 13 meeting of the vestry, it was agreed to engage with that realtor.

So, what is next? A lot! First, it's important to reiterate that the building hasn't been sold yet, we have simply agreed to a realtor. Also, we haven't excluded other possibilities, such as sharing the building with another congregation or group. However, we are proceeding based on the assumption that the building will end up being sold. Given that, there is a lot going on.

One of the next topics to be addressed after securing a realtor was looking at our columbarium. Doris and Father Stephen went through every niche to verify their contents and there were some surprises. We have thirty-three occupied niches. Next, we will be doing some research and trying to determine next of kin and contact them about how to proceed.

There are many other steps ahead of us. We need to ponder on possible office and storage space. We need to explore real-world options for worship locations. Also, we need to do an inventory of everything the church owns and decide what should be kept, what should be sold, and what should be given away. All of this will take time and will require help.

It is important for us all to remember what is the role of the Church. In the *Book of Common Prayer* on page 855 we read that, “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” The next line helps to provide guidance on how we are to do this. “The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.” The purpose of the Church isn’t to maintain property. Our job is to pray, worship, and proclaim the Good News, which includes justice, peace, and love. Through the possible sale of our property, we believe we can get back to what we are called to do and to be. Our hope is that we can once again focus on mission and ministry, and not so much on a temperamental HVAC system, leaks, plowing the parking lot, and more.

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 several months, 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,

Dr. Steve Gerstner, Senior Warden
Doris Gerstner, Junior Warden and Treasurer
Rev. Stephen C. Day, Rector