

## **Seacoast Shared Ministry Discernment Committee** Final Report

### Summary

The Seacoast Shared Ministry Discernment Committee has met over the last eight months to gather information about the Trinity and Christ Church congregations and to discern a path forward that can lead to flourishing. Although there were many ideas considered, the strongest theme was that it is time for these two communities to formally become one under a new shared identity. Once this joining has occurred, the single congregation will be in a position to discern the details of things such as worship, facilities, outreach, pre-schools, etc., and move toward a position of self sufficiency, ideally culminating in a move to parish status. The current covenant between the two churches expires at the end of the church year in 2018. That would be a natural target for completing the merger.

### Background

On March 19<sup>th</sup> Bishop Hirschfeld commissioned a committee to “explore how we can more joyfully pursue God’s mission while restoring a sense of partnership among us.” This was done to address “expressions of distrust and antagonism directed toward ‘the Diocese’” that have come to the surface as a result of the recent Fair Share adjustment process and some related activity with regard to Fair Share.

### Committee members

<b>Member</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
The Rev. Chip Robinson	Vicar, Seacoast Shared Ministry
Gary Dozier	Seacoast Shared Ministry – Christ Church
Lee Hoginski	Seacoast Shared Ministry – Christ Church
Bob Main	Seacoast Shared Ministry – Trinity Church
Sherry Kellett	Seacoast Shared Ministry – Trinity Church
Wayne Trombly	Mission Resources Committee
The Rev. Rob Stevens	St. John’s - Portsmouth
Barbara Colburn	Christ Church – Exeter
Benge Ambrogi	The Episcopal Church of New Hampshire

### Process

Committee had eight meetings between March and October. The first six meetings were focused on information gathering. Each of these meetings focused on a particular topic or asked one or two questions, which are summarized below.

Date	Topic / Question	Key Learning
3/23	What did you hear at the parish meeting with the Bishop? Why are we doing this?	We are committed to shared ministry; we are one community.
4/26	Fair Share Resolution	We need to get out of the budget struggle that has been dominating our existence
5/10	What are our ministries to our communities and the world?	Both churches have active missions to their local communities. Christ Church's centers on Little Blessings, Trinity's focuses on a number of activities working out of Hobbs House
5/16	Worship options	There are no easy or obvious answers to the worship arrangement question – some people will be unhappy no matter what we do. But, there are real advantages to worshipping as one community.
6/1	Facilities – Trinity	Trinity's facilities are in relatively good shape, but there are some improvements that could be made to help w/ curb appeal - e.g. better signage, steeple, get rid of stairs to nowhere.
6/7	Facilities – Christ Church	Christ Church is also in decent shape, although it is larger and probably needs more work than Trinity. The property was donated with a stipulation that it be used for ecclesiastical purposes (later confirmed with Terry Knowles of the Attorney General's office.) It is in a prime location. Things could be done to make the space more flexible; it is currently too large for the congregation.
6/1 & 6/7	Finances, membership, & governance	It is probably time to start integrating finances, which would lead to deepening the relationship between the congregations. There is an "our church/their church" sentiment that would need to be addressed
All dates	What is God doing in the Seacoast region?	A lot! God is doing what God does: bringing us together, inspiring us, challenging us, motivating us, opening doors for us, and giving us the gifts we need to carry out God's mission in becoming the beloved community.

### Discernment

With the information gathered at these six meetings, the committee met on Sept 19<sup>th</sup> and Oct 17<sup>th</sup> to discern the path forward. We started this process by having each member write down their vision for how they would move forward if they were the one making the decision. These were presented individually without debate or comment. Some common elements of the ideas are listed below. The number in parentheses indicates how often this element occurred in one of the ideas presented.

- Combine governance and finances; create a single Bishop's Committee and a single budget, single financial accounts (7)
- Reconfigure Christ Church sanctuary & chapel to allow for broader community use (4)
- Maintain two worship locations; current configuration (2)
- Combine congregations and have one worship location (2)
- Expand Little Blessings (2)
- Enhance partnerships with other seacoast congregations (1)
- Work toward becoming a parish (1)

As the group discerned, it became clear that we really couldn't consider the various worship, facility, and program ideas until we tackled the one item that we were unanimously in agreement on: combining governance and finance. Rob Stevens said it best when asked what this opportunity might look like to a clergy person considering serving here:

*"If there were two businesses I wouldn't be interested. If there is one business, I wouldn't care how many worship sites you have. Worship places are important, but having a unified budget would go a long way to getting people to come together. You can't overstate the spiritual implications of having one bank account; we're in this together."*

The group feels that combined governance will save time and energy; put less wear and tear on the clergy, wardens, treasurer, which will allow more time and energy for mission and vitality.

There is a strong sentiment amongst the committee members that the governance integration should come first, and then have the combined leadership body decide what to do with the facilities and worship services. The long-term configuration should come from within rather than be imposed from the outside. The congregation is more likely to flourish if they own the plan.

The group also feels that we need to establish a timeline and stick to it. The current covenant between the two churches expires at the end of the season after Pentecost in 2018 (before Advent). This would be a natural time to complete the merger; avoiding putting time and energy into revisiting and renewing the covenant. With a clear plan in place, Christ Church, Trinity Church, and the Episcopal Church of New Hampshire can mutually execute and hold each other accountable.

There are resources we can draw on to do this. We have the experience of churches that have merged in the Diocese of New Hampshire: West Claremont / Charlestown and Lancaster / Groveton. There are also resources from other Dioceses; the Diocese of Long Island has a comprehensive document on the process involved in merging congregations.

Over the eight months that this committee has been meeting, we have watched these two communities work more closely together. There seems to be a spirit of cooperation and partnership that is strengthening. The recommendation to merge the two entities feels like a natural extension of what has been happening throughout this discernment process.

Respectfully Submitted,

Benge Ambrogi  
Missioner for Congregational Initiatives  
Chair, Seacoast Shared Ministry Discernment Committee