

Parish Profile

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church



Vergennes, Vermont
August 2021

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Our mission at St. Paul's is to be a community reflecting and demonstrating God's compassion and love to all through prayer, education and outreach.

MISSION STATEMENT

Today, St. Paul's is seeking new leadership that can support our congregation in living out our mission to be a "*community reflecting and demonstrating God's compassion and love to all through prayer, education and outreach.*" We have embraced the humbling internal work of reflecting on our own role in the world and how we might better spread God's love and advance justice. We are committed to service in and out of our congregation to build a more compassionate and connected community. The leader we seek will support rich worship service with engaging sermons and support of our music and youth ministries. We do not believe our work starts and ends on Sundays, however - as our interim pastor reminded us this past week, when our worship ends, *our service begins*. Our second hope for our leader is to help our congregation reflect on and set priorities so that we can be effective agents of change within the limits of our resources.

UNDERSTANDING OF BAPTISMAL MINISTRY

St Paul's ministry serves those baptized in the church and offers the Good News to those seeking solace or hope. We live out our baptismal ministry through the beautiful liturgy, prayer, outreach, and education. We have traditionally used the BCP liturgy. We renew our baptismal promises using the BCP form with adaptations, including the following:

- *Will you persevere in resisting evil, particularly the evils of racism, white supremacy, oppression, and indifference, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?*
- *Will you cherish the wondrous works of God, and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation?*

We will, with God's help. Our baptismal ministry encompasses life within the parish and outside of it. Our congregation strives to live out the belief that church is not just about showing up on a Sunday so that we can "seek to serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves."

Members of St. Paul's serve the surrounding community, cooking for the residents of the John Graham Shelter and providing snacks to young people at the Boys and Girls Club. Members of St. Paul's have been active in speaking out for racial justice and educating ourselves about the effects of racism on ourselves and others. This community involvement has been an important part of our church's efforts to strive "for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."

We have explicitly embraced the baptismal covenant as part of our youth education. In 2019-20, our Sunday School curriculum was designed to teach and help follow each of the promises of the baptismal covenant. For example, to honor our commitment to justice and peace, respecting the dignity of all persons, our Sunday School children decided on a coat drive, and collected over fifty jackets as well as hats, scarves, and mittens.

HISTORY OF THE CONGREGATION

St. Paul's Episcopal Church has been an active congregation based in Vergennes for over two hundred years. Vergennes is located on a set of waterfalls on the scenic Otter Creek. In the 1800s, it was thus a destination venue marking passage to Lake Champlain, and the city was sought to become a center of business and commerce. The Vermont Legislature convened in Vergennes in 1798, and the bell that rings on Sundays at St. Paul's is the same bell used in the old courthouse building to ring in the 1798 legislature.

A group of Episcopalians gathered in 1811 to form the Protestant Episcopal Society in Vergennes. This group included state legislators, tradesmen, merchants, lawyers, and businessmen. In 1832 a group of these early Episcopalians re-established themselves as St. Paul's Episcopal Church. They were granted permission by the city to build on the corner next to the green, and our early Gothic Revival-style church was built in 1834.

An Historic Building Serving a Dedicated Congregation

The congregations since have had a deep love and commitment to St. Paul's. Their dedication to the church can be seen in the many lovely religious artifacts that make up the church itself—a delicately carved rood arch and altar rail, a large stone baptismal font, a pulpit of filigree metalwork, a lectern with a brass eagle, and much more—all given to St. Paul's by its parishioners over the course of its 19th century history, capturing a spirit of an earlier time. More recently, parishioners donated a lovely, crocheted Lord's Prayer mural for the sanctuary, created by a member whose family roots go back to the founding of Ferrisburgh and Vergennes.

Our commitment to families in Vergennes and Addison County is thus deeply rooted in our past. Our central location on the city green and our historic buildings have been great assets for our congregation and offer enormous promise for serving our community. In the recent decade, we have renewed our commitment to focusing outward rather than inward and are working to use our central location and close-knit congregation to best serve our mission.

CONGREGATIONAL LIFE: WHO WE ARE

In this section, we describe aspects of our St. Paul's community, describing our recent activities and drawing upon individual interviews this past summer and the congregational discernment meeting held in July 2021. We asked our parishioners to reflect on who we are, what we value, and where we want to go in the future.

Commitment to Families

St. Paul's has always been a place for families to gather and worship – in fact, our large 19th century baptismal font was a gift from the Sunday school. Today, our Sunday school brings together young children whose families live in Vergennes and nearby communities. The growth in the number of young families in the congregation over the past decades has been a gift, with 10-12 children gathering each week (in pre-pandemic times). We hope to offer education and a place of connection and spirituality to these children and their parents as they grow.

Many parishioners describe deep connections to the members of St. Paul's, describing the church as a multi-generational family and open community. These families bring us joy in various ways. Parishioners find joy in the children (who we have missed seeing this year!) growing in faith, our worship and music, the connectedness to others, coming together for a common purpose, listening to words of wisdom, feeling comfortable, and even in polishing the brass in preparation for worship!

Community Support and Partnership

Over the past ten years, our congregation has worked to maintain and strengthen our commitment to our local partners and global concerns. We seek to be a living congregation whose spiritual commitment and service is not limited to Sunday morning services.

St. Paul's Parish Hall is used by AA and Girl Scouts, and occasionally hosts community gatherings. The summer concert band that plays on the city green stores supplies in our basement, and St. Paul's 1862 Hook Organ has been used in occasional community recitals. In recent years, we have played an active role in the Vergennes Community Food Shelf, run a community garden plot, participated in the monthly Table of Grace community meal, outreach funds with a food booth during the Memorial Day parade, and offering a monthly morning service at our local residential care home. Our outreach dollars directly support other local organizations, including Addison Open Door Clinic, The Boys and Girls Club of Vergennes, and the John Graham Shelter, to name a few. For international concerns, we donate to the Episcopal Relief and Development Fund as well as Doctors without Borders.

We have volunteers who work with the elderly, hospice, and homeless, and others who volunteer in thrift shops to benefit the needy in our area. Some speak on the phone regularly to those in need to help fund food, medical help, and housing. Some cook community meals, some are schoolteachers, others coordinate toy donations to non-profits, a few are talented members of the city band. Members serve on boards of local non-profits such as Porter Hospital, Addison County Economic Development, the Watershed Center, and Women of Wisdom.

SISP: Preserving our Buildings, Spurring our Outreach

One of our most active committees is the “SISP” committee. The Strategic Investment in Sacred Places (SISP) project started as part of a long-standing concern over the preservation of our historic buildings. In the 1990s, for example, the roof collapsed, and it took a small group working for many years to pay off a large loan by selling mulch every spring outside the church.

In 2014-16, the SISP committee participated in a two-year training that helped our parish explore new ways to serve our community while preserving our historic buildings. Through surveys and outreach, we found we could best serve our parish and our community by expanding public green space in downtown Vergennes. This “streetscape project” on our west-facing lawn has been divided into three parts: (1) improving the sidewalk for pedestrian and handicap access, (2) repairing our stained glass windows and replacing the protecting coverings, and (3) re-landscaping our lawn and gardens.

- *Sidewalk:* In 2018, we had successfully secured a Vermont Transportation Grant, working with the Vergennes Partnership and City Council. From January to April 2019, we worked with the City Manager to discuss design and construction. The old sidewalk was removed in late April and the new sidewalk and retaining wall was completed in late May. The project came in substantially under budget, and in September, City Council voted to forgive St. Paul’s financial commitment to the sidewalk construction.
- *Stained Glass Windows:* In Spring 2019, we solicited and evaluated multiple bids to repair our stained-glass windows. We ultimately agreed to hire Larry Ribbecke to repair the windows, Jeff Hornbeck to repair and repaint the wood frames, and Acme Glass to provide new storm windows. The work began in the summer of 2019, and the window repair was completed in late December 2019. The storm windows were installed in the summer of 2020. This part of the project has been funded by grants from the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont, the Walter Cerf Fund at the Vermont Community Foundation, Vermont Historic Preservation, and several gifts from St. Paul’s parishioners.
- *Relandscaping:* Fundraising for our grounds was put on hold by the COVID pandemic. Given the renewed appreciation for outside spaces for public gathering during the pandemic, we look forward to returning to this last phase in Spring 2022.

Our central location has had some surprising benefits. Recently, we have agreed to serve as a tower from which VTel can provide Wi-Fi for the greater community. It’s a 21st century partnership that allows St. Paul’s to rent space to VTel while VTel is able to provide better communication choices for its customers.

Racial Justice

The past year of the pandemic and racial reckoning have reinforced our belief that everyone is welcome and children of God. Our eyes have been opened more to issues of racial injustice, and members have participated in personal explorations and challenging conversations.

In the wake of Black Lives Matter protests and national racial reckoning, St. Paul's started to get active. Initially, we communicated our support for racial justice with signs hung on our centrally located church stairs in downtown Vergennes, saying *Black Lives Matter* and *Love Your Neighbor*. Our Sunday School children made rainbows to hang in our Parish Hall windows, and we shared these on Facebook and Instagram pages for those who could not make it downtown.

As part of our own education, we next started an "undoing racism" book group at St. Paul's. Meeting over zoom during the pandemic, we read Black histories, biographies, and fiction. Most importantly, we engaged in vulnerable conversations. In addition, some members attended relevant online workshops for further education. We brought these conversations to our webpage and congregation, and took advantage of resources offered by the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont.

Several members of St. Paul's participated in the community-wide racial justice initiative, "Voices in the Park," which met during the summer of 2020 on the city green following the murder of George Floyd. Initial vigils later expanded to community conversations about underlying systemic racism in Vermont and beyond.

Finally, some St. Paul's parishioners were part of a community group dedicated to getting an historic marker for Stephen Bates, Vermont's first known black sheriff and Chief of Police, who died in Vergennes in 1907. He and his family were members of St. Paul's in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The rediscovery of his story—from pre-civil war enslavement to sheriff of Vergennes for 25 years—created a lot of public and media interest. In October 2021, the historic marker will be dedicated in Vergennes, and the Canon on Cultural Transformation of the Vermont Diocese will officiate a service at St. Paul's prior to the event.

Lessons from the Pandemic

The COVID pandemic led our little community to online services. While we have missed the opportunity to worship in person, the weekly worship and connection has been a lifeline for many in our community and extends our reach beyond Addison County. We have returned to in-person, masked services as of August 2021, and remain sensitive to health guidance from state authorities and the diocese.

We are offering a Zoom link for congregation members to join services remotely, but have missed many members who have not been able to join this year. We want and need to re-engage those members and the children who have generally stayed away from Zoom. Some find participation on Zoom challenging. The pandemic has separated us, even with the best intentions.

OUR FUTURE: WHERE WE WANT TO GO

As we consider our future, we want to be intentional about where we put our time, talent, and treasure, making the most of our limited resources and avoiding burnout for individuals who carry a heavy load for our congregation.

In many ways, where we find ourselves can be seen as an exciting opportunity. What if we approached things differently? What if we used our assets (people and buildings) in new ways that allow growth both communally and spiritually without exhausting ourselves? St. Paul's is looking at all of these factors as we move forward. We need to manage expectations for our small congregation. In our lowest moments, we wonder whether we can survive - and we need to figure out how to be church in a new way. We have a viable, loving community of support for vulnerable members that we do not want to lose.

Our Priorities

We are not the largest parish in the Episcopal diocese in Vermont, but we have a talented and diverse group who feel strengthened by the work they do in and through St. Paul's. The discernment conversations this summer yielded many ideas of where our priorities lie and how to act upon them.

- *Serving our families and children:* as many church congregations age, we are fortunate to have a half dozen young families who regularly attend. Zoom fatigue and an inability to connect with friends has kept most of our young people from church during the pandemic, despite some moments of great creativity and meaningful connection. Rebuilding the Sunday School and a commitment to youth participation and engagement are shared priorities for all ages in our parish.
- *Inspiring our members:* many congregation members emphasized that rich worship services are important, offering a place of rest, reflection, inspiration, and peace. The music, the message, and the liturgy are central to our worship experience. Some older members would prefer the basic services, the rituals, the prayers, a "proper" morning full service. Preserving the culture and history of St. Paul's is important to them. Others are ready to try some new ways. Another member also misses the 8am service as that's the only one that she and her family can make due to work. Another member just says we need to open up the church and that's enough – let's work on ourselves first.
- *Outreach for social and racial justice:* More meetings and events on racial justice might be a good theme to pursue, continuing the work of the book group and historic marker. We might expand our work with the John Graham shelter. A clear sense of community needs could help these efforts, and many members are willing to start small.

Concerns

There is a lot of energy as we return to in-person services, and this is a turning point for our parish as we come out of the pandemic and think about new practices and opportunities.

However, we face real limits and concerns as we look to the future. A few themes emerged from our summer discernment conversations:

- *Avoiding burnout:* Many in our congregation are aware of that our to-do list is too long for the time and energy we have. We are a small group and want to care for our members, avoiding burnout and drawing healthy boundaries. If we look at what we lack, it seems like we need more people everywhere - people in pews, people to sing, people to polish brass, people to volunteer. Many long-time volunteers are resigning from important committees like Stewardship, and we need to make sure we are giving to our members, not just asking of them.
- *Building use:* our buildings are old and require constant maintenance. They may offer a lot to the community, but the financial resources required to support three historic buildings are immense, and take time and treasure from personal relationships and service. There is a general feeling that we either grow bigger or get rid of some fixed costs. They distract us from the core purpose of the church - spiritual growth and fulfillment in community.
- *“Two Churches:”* in some ways, the pandemic has allowed us to get closer than ever before. However, we worry that there will be two groups in our church, those who have been through these experiences together and those who have not. Some think it offers us an opportunity to explore different ways of worshipping together (e.g., facing pews) and offer hybrid services, which we are now just setting up in church. This divide marked prior years at St. Paul’s, where our small congregation met at two different times (8 am and 10 am), limiting connections.

We know who we are and what we care about---family, breaking bread together, service to our community (Sunday School, outreach, community partners). We are looking for encouragement, creativity, and inspiration as we identify and work on our priorities.



LEADERSHIP: OUR HOPES

In the past few decades, we have gone from part-time to full time and back to part-time priests. Our current part time interim pastor is working well under the circumstance of a tight budget because many lay people have stepped up. We have learned that a full time priest is not necessary for the vitality of our parish but also learned that because we are a small congregation it is much work for a small group of people. This effort is exhausting and stressful and we all worry about burn-out. Still, as one member remarked, we may now have “the strongest vestry we’ve seen since coming to St. Paul’s.”

Having a quarter time interim minister has helped us live out our baptismal covenant in new ways. We have invited, encouraged, trained and supported parishioners to step outside their comfort zones and participate in new roles within the congregation and community. We now have lay people leading morning prayer on a regular basis while other lay people are preaching, and still others are running Zoom so those who cannot come to church can participate. We truly are becoming a bi-vocational congregation where, in addition to our work as teachers, carpenters, nurses, artists, business people, and volunteers in the community, we are leaders in our own rights in our own church community.

There is further need of formation with both adults and children to understand, be energized by, and live out our baptismal covenant. As part of its recent work around the ministry tasks of St. Paul’s, the vestry identified particular goals that will continue to help us live out our baptismal covenant both at St. Paul’s and in the community. We are committed to seek ecumenical partnerships with local faith communities both socially and liturgically. We made a plan to engage in shared learning opportunities regarding worship, youth programs and outreach, declining numbers and shared leadership. We are also in the process of developing a plan in which St. Paul’s, other faith communities and the wider Vergennes community can explore the rectory and parish hall in order to brainstorm possible uses outside of its current use for the St. Paul’s community.

We thus hope our next clergy will embrace cooperation with lay leadership, think creatively, and support us as we continue to engage the community beyond the walls of the church. We are challenged to live out the entirety of our baptismal ministry during the global pandemic. We will strive to continue to adjust and respond to these changes and uncertainty.

Attributes and skills

Parishioners were asked in group conversations and a self-study survey about the skills and attributes they desire in clergy. Our parishioners had no shortage of warm descriptions! We heard that our members hope for someone who is: dedicated, devoted to church; genuine warmth and caring for parishioners of all ages; energized, enthusiastic, forward-looking, flexible, welcoming, open to change, engaging to both the congregation and the larger community; being a public face of our church; a good cheer leader and coordinator, a guide; liturgically creative; has a sense of humor; ability to connect with children; a good preacher; has a pulse on what is happening in our society especially racial reckoning; good technical skills for reaching people online; boundless vision.

Of these many wonderful qualities, we are particular interested in leaders that offer a welcoming tone for current and new members, support the ongoing efforts described above, who preach engaging sermons and who work as a partner. The table below summarizes the survey results.

<i>For selecting a new priest, how important are these qualities to you? (17 responses)</i>	1= most imppt 5 = least imppt
actively welcomes and brings new members into the church	1.47
supports ministries and activities within the parish	1.47
works to stay connected with current members	1.59
fosters fellowship	1.59
preaches engaging sermons	1.59
Functions as a partner not a ruler	1.65
Personal ministry to the sick, dying, and bereaved	1.82
involves congregation in outreach	1.82
dedicated to Christian formation for adults, youth and children	1.88
embraces mutual ministry, open to new ideas	1.88
works closely with Vestry and parish committees	1.94
assists/empowers victims of injustice and oppression	2.00
promotes lay participation and leadership	2.06
can preach children's sermons	2.18
Establishes pastoral care program for visiting members	2.24
Has concern for the care of creation	2.24
is personally committed to minister outside parish	2.41
uses a variety of forms of liturgy	2.59
administers church office activities and finances	2.82
individual outreach to discuss spiritual development and beliefs	2.88

STRUCTURE, ORGANIZATION, FINANCES

The Parish currently has an interim pastor and deacon. In addition to senior and junior warden, clerk, and treasurer, there are five members of the Vestry who serve staggered three-year terms. We have an organist, an active choir, and volunteer leadership of several important committees: Altar Guild, Sunday School, Outreach, SISP, and Stewardship.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
operating income	--	\$119,036	\$139,340	\$97,899	\$126,154	\$75,284
non-operating income	--	\$4,485	\$23,004	\$6,991	\$16,085	\$19,875
TOTAL INCOME	--	\$123,522	\$162,344	\$127,391	\$142,239	\$109,559
operating expenses	--	\$125,230	\$124,583	\$127,561	\$104,115	\$73,079
non-operating expenses	--	\$635	\$2,603	\$3,504	\$40,115	\$30,283
TOTAL EXPENSES	--	\$125,865	\$127,186	\$131,065	\$144,230	\$103,362
Average Sunday Attendance	46.6	49.6	40.9	39	32.5	n/a
pledging units	32	36	35	31	28	26
total pledged (intentional gifts)	\$66,944	\$73,954	\$70,834	\$70,136	\$59,642	\$54,346

Assets and Endowment

Saint Paul's has one major long-term endowment fund, the value of which was \$362,660 at the end of 2020. Those resources are managed by the Diocesan Unit Fund, held by Raymond James. In addition to supporting Saint Paul's regular operating account, the church holds a money market account with designated funds for a variety of activities, including property improvement and other ongoing needs and ministries. This account contained \$40,127 at the end of 2020. The church's historic buildings are owned by the diocese and managed by the parish. There are no outstanding liabilities. The full financial reports of the parish are available for the last five years at the end of each Annual Report. These are available on our website (link [here](#)).

VERGENNES AND ADDISON COUNTY

Vergennes was incorporated as Vermont's first city in 1788. With just two square miles and a population of around 2,600, Vergennes is known locally as the "Little City." It is 25 miles south of Burlington and near the junction of two local thoroughfares, Rte 7 (which runs south to Middlebury and Rutland) and Rte 22A (to New York and the Adirondacks).

St. Paul's sits on the corner of the city green in Vergennes in an [historic, walkable downtown](#) full of wonderful shops and restaurants. The city hosts two unique attractions: the Bixby Library (a magnificent example of Greek Revival architecture with robust community programming) and the Vergennes Opera House (a restored musical and theater venue next door to the church). There are impressive natural waterfalls on the Otter Creek and the city is a ten-minute drive to Lake Champlain, with recreation opportunities at two lovely state parks (Button Bay and Kingsland Bay) and the Basin Harbor Club.

Many members of our congregation live in surrounding communities in [Addison County](#), including Ferrisburgh, Monkton, and Bristol. According to the US Census Bureau, Addison County had a population of [36,882 in 2019](#) (steady compared to 36,821 in 2010). While Vermont and New England are seeing slight declines in population relative to the rest of the United States, [recent population growth](#), related in part to relocations during the pandemic, puts the state's current population at 2.8% above 2010.

The median household income is \$61,000 and 36% of residents 25 and over are college graduates. High quality health care is available at UVM-Porter Medical Center in Middlebury and at Fletcher Allen Health Care in Burlington. The largest employers in the county are Middlebury College and UVM-Porter in Middlebury and Collins Aerospace and Northlands Job Corps in Vergennes. We have a thriving local paper, the [Addison County Independent](#).

St. Paul's Episcopal Church Ministry Discernment Committee

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