

December 20, 2007

Dear Colleagues in Ministry,

Please find attached our report entitled “Learnings About and From the Closure of Trinity Episcopal Church, Montclair,” which was received by Diocesan Council in December 2007. We have spent considerable time engaging in appreciative inquiry of Trinity’s story. The clergy and lay leaders of Trinity were gracious in their conversations with us, and they especially hope that one of their legacies in our Diocese might be to offer learnings for each of us to apply in our own congregations.

In looking at the whole of the report, we believe that the following learnings from Trinity’s closure apply to all of our congregations:

- Congregations that are unclear about their purpose or vocation as disciples of Jesus Christ incur a significant risk of conflict and systemic decline.
- An important “warning sign” for a congregation to heed is when its leaders (both lay and clergy) spend most of their time focusing on day-to-day existence (e.g. keeping up with the bills) without dreaming or planning for long-term possibilities. Likewise, a consistent decline in average Sunday attendance over the past three to five years should signal a wake-up call for a congregation’s lay and clergy leaders.
- An inability to adapt to a changing neighborhood puts a congregation at noteworthy risk for decline.
- Poor communication between a Vestry and a Vicar/Rector, or poor communication between a Vestry and members of their congregation jeopardizes a congregation’s ability to grow and always leads to conflict.
- When a congregation’s leaders identify or feel that it is in decline, being proactive rather than “waiting to see if something will happen” is essential. Now that the Diocesan Ministry Capacity Assessment Tool is available, a congregation and the Diocese can partner together to systematically address decline and stagnation.

We encourage all congregations to use the Ministry Capacity Areas Assessment. As members of the Congregational Vitality Working Group, both we and Canon Carter Echols (our staff liaison) would be delighted to assist and support your congregation in proactively assessing and addressing your weaknesses and strengthening you for even better ministry. For helpful resources, especially our Ministry Capacity Areas Assessment, we encourage you to visit the *Congregational Life* and *Clergy/Wardens’ Handbook* sections of the Diocesan website (www.dioceseofnewark.org), or feel free to call any of us personally.

The story of Trinity’s decline is, of course, difficult and painful. However, as followers of the Risen Christ, we believe that in death always comes Resurrection and new life.

Yours in Christ,

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Learnings About and From The Closure of Trinity Episcopal Church, Montclair

Received by Diocesan Council – December 2007

Prepared by: Congregational Vitality Work Group

Background

Accompanying its authorization to “declare extinct” Trinity Episcopal Church, Montclair, the 2007 Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark also directed the Diocesan Council to conduct an inquiry about Trinity’s closure and report back to the Diocese with a specific interest in applicable learnings for the Diocese and our congregations as we move forward together.

Members of the Congregational Vitality Work Group of Diocesan Council spent six months in 2007 interviewing former lay and clergy leaders from Trinity, Montclair, with particular attention to gaining as many different perspectives and viewpoints possible. Using the Diocese of Newark’s Six Ministry Capacity Areas as our framework, we inquired about a variety of facets of Trinity’s ministry and mission, asking about everything from their neighborhood context to the functionality of Trinity’s basic ministry systems. We have chosen to report our findings through the lens of the Expectations adopted by Diocesan Council related to those Congregational Ministry Capacity Areas.

Summary

While many circumstances and factors led to its closing, the primary learning for our Diocese and its congregations from the life, work, and ministry of the people of Trinity, Montclair is that the congregation ultimately diminished its larger focus for life-giving mission and ministry. Focusing inwardly on day-to-day basic survival: drained the congregation of creative energy for worship, led to further declines in average Sunday attendance (which lowered congregational enthusiasm), and led to conflict in their lay-clergy partnership.

Additional Learnings

- o The Ministry Capacity discernment process should have been facilitated more proactively by both the congregation and the Diocese. Now that the Ministry Capacity tool exists, in the future, either the Diocese or the congregation will be able to proactively initiate this mutual discernment process.
- o Many of Trinity’s conflicts over the years included longtime interpersonal issues and disagreements between and among families and subgroups. None of these interpersonal conflicts were addressed sufficiently to bring about effective working relationships that might have prevented the congregation’s closure.
- o Although there was intense support from diocesan staff and volunteers and, from diocesan organizations in the last few years of Trinity’s ministry (especially from the Congregational Growth and

Development Fund and the Ward J. Herbert Fund), it was unfortunately too late to provide significant life-giving support. However, once the congregation decided to close, the Diocese still played an important role in helping Trinity's members to make grace-filled transitions to new worshipping communities.

- o The new congregation that many people of Trinity chose to join was able to invite, encourage, and enable the people of Trinity to share their time, talent, and treasure in a more life-giving way.

Understanding Trinity, Montclair Closure From responses to the Capacity for Ministry Questions

External Ministry Contexts

1. **Diocesan Expectation:** *Each congregation will actively seek information about its mission field (the area in which it is located).*

In what ways did Trinity seek information about their neighborhood?

- Long-term members provided information and relationships with neighbors, community, etc.
- The congregation was aware that its neighborhood and demographics had drastically changed, but no significant research about these changes was done. There was no regular inquiry (i.e. Vestry planning) about how they might best respond to their changing neighborhood.

2. **Diocesan Expectation:** *Each congregation will consider information about the area in which they are located as they develop ministry activities.*

What did Trinity learn from that information that organized their approach to what they did as a congregation?

- Trinity considered opening a thrift shop to assist neighbors.
- With a largely elderly population, the congregation was unable to do any systematic door-to-door evangelism. Word-of-mouth invitations were difficult for many elderly members because many of their members lived in isolation.

Christian Identity, Gifts, Strengths, and Challenges

3. **Diocesan Expectation:** *Each congregation has big picture priorities that can be articulated by the person in the pew.*

What were Trinity's top 4 priorities as a congregation?

- Other than staying open, the congregation had no clearly articulated priorities. One member described them as "frozen in time" and unable to move forward without clergy leadership.

4. **Diocesan Expectation:** *Each congregation can demonstrate measurable effort in attempting to address its priorities.*

What did Trinity do in the last two years to live into those priorities?

- Without a clear purpose, the congregation drifted into day-to-day operations, and as its population slowly dwindled (because of conflict, death, and attrition), clarifying a purpose seemed out of its grasp.

5. **Diocesan Expectation:** *Each congregation regularly clarifies and articulates its strengths.*

What were Trinity's greatest congregational strengths to achieve those priorities?

- Very active senior population and very involved single mothers.

6. **Diocesan Expectation:** *Each congregation regularly clarifies and articulates its challenges.*

What were Trinity's greatest congregational challenges to achieve those priorities?

- Need for stronger, more consistent lay and clergy leaders over the years.
- Various internal conflicts between groups in the congregation and between the congregation and its clergy.
- One member said: "All we ever seemed to talk about was money."
- A "set-in-their-ways" senior population.

7. **Diocesan Expectation:** *Each congregation understands its effect on and reputation in its community.*

For what was Trinity best known in its neighborhood? And how did Trinity know this?

- Trinity had a good ministry of hospitality for community-related events. Every church-sponsored event was extremely well attended (e.g. concerts, card parties, musical productions).

Vision/Future Goals/Dreams

8. **Diocesan Expectation:** *Each congregation identifies its unique purpose based on its understanding of God's will for it.*

What did you think God wanted from and for Trinity?

- The only answer that many members were able to give was that God wanted Trinity to "stay alive."

9. **Diocesan Expectation:** *Long term possibilities for the future will be derived from each congregation's unique overall mission and those possibilities will be revisited each year.*

What possibilities did the congregation see for itself in 5 years? In 10 years?

- Because so much attention was fixed on day-to-day existence, Trinity did not have a specific set of long-term dreams or

possibilities. However, several ideas floated about during its last few years that never came to fruition: revitalization of Sunday -School, acolyte training, various youth activities, and possibility of seeking a merger with a neighboring congregation.

Systems Functionality (How did things work?)

10. Diocesan Expectation: *Congregations will meet all canonical responsibilities. For example: Parochial reports will be turned in by March 1, Audits will be turned in by September 1, and Diocesan pledges will be turned in by December 1.*

What was Trinity's record with its Canonical Responsibilities?

- Congregation had a history of being late with its annual audit, pledge cards, and parochial reports.
- Because of previous clergy financial misconduct, the congregation/parish existed in arrears or deficits for much of the past 5 years.
- The congregation did not deepen its understanding of stewardship, and depended far too much on its internal organizations for "fund raising."

11. Diocesan Expectation: *Each congregation finds ways to discern members' gifts and seeks to engage all of its members in congregational priorities.*

How did Trinity identify members' individual gifts and engage them with your priorities?

- No effective system in place.

12. Diocesan Expectation: *Each congregation consistently seeks to expand the number of people involved in leadership, to engage in succession planning for leaders and to train and support its leaders.*

In what primary ways did Trinity recruit, empower, and support people for leadership?

- Members were asked to serve on Vestry or as deputies to Diocesan Convention without any advanced preparation or training.
- The congregation relied too heavily on clergy leadership.

13. Diocesan Expectation: *Each congregation actively maintains safe, attractive, accessible buildings for ministry use.*

What were the top 3 priorities / needs for your buildings?

- Unclear vision/plan for building maintenance.

14. Diocesan Expectation: *Vestries regularly devote time to identifying and developing congregational ministries.*

What was the most exciting conversation Trinity's vestry had about ministry and mission in the last 6 months?

- None. In addition, it was reported that there was very little, if any, communication between the Vestry and the congregation in its last six months.

15. Diocesan Expectation: *Each congregation regularly operates with balanced budgets.*

Of the last 5 years – how many ended with a deficit?

- Four of the last five years.

16. Diocesan Expectation: *Any excess of expenses over income will result from strategic decisions to invest in growth or ministry.*

If Trinity had deficit(s) – in what ways was the deficit an investment in ministry?

- One member reported: “It was more like we were treading water rather than moving ahead.”

Church Growth/Evangelism Capacity

17. Diocesan Expectation: *Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) consistently increases over time. Note: ASA reflects increasing participation and growth.*

What was the trend in Trinity’s ASA (Average Sunday Attendance) in the last 10 years?

- The declining trend in average Sunday attendance did not trigger the Vestry or congregation to a “wake-up call.” Instead, the decline was met with a shift into survival mode.

18. Diocesan Expectation: *Each congregation assesses the reasons new members first visited to enhance its ability to attract new potential members.*

Why did the people who most recently joined the congregation come to church the first time?

- While visitors came regularly to Sunday worship, one member reported that nobody was friendly to them. The atmosphere of decline did not encourage anyone to stay.
- The congregation understood itself as unique in terms of its racial and social composition. While this was an asset, it was also a stumbling block in some ways to growth, particularly in a neighborhood that was becoming increasingly diverse.

19. Diocesan Expectation: *Each congregation understands the reasons new members joined, to enhance its ability to build its membership.*

Of those most recent members, why did they join?

N/A

20. Diocesan Expectation: *Congregations understand the faith experience of their new members, so that they can best understand and respond to ministry opportunities.*

What % of people who joined in the last year were not Episcopalians?
N/A

Capacity for Mutual Ministry

21. Diocesan Expectation: *Each congregation is able to illustrate effective shared ministry between its clergy and laity.*

What were the greatest strengths and challenges of your clergy/lay partnership?

- Trinity had a history of poor lay-clergy partnerships, particularly focused on previous clergy misconduct. In addition, the congregation did not process well its past poor lay-clergy relationships. As an example, following the departure of a priest in 1993, a serious rift occurred which, to this day, seems not to have been fully healed.
- Congregation had major difficulty communicating its expectations with its clergy, and the clergy did not communicate their expectations well with the congregation.
- The parish never engaged in regular mutual ministry reviews.
- Cultural misunderstandings between the previous rector and the congregation provided a significant challenge to healthy conversation and team building.

Members of the Congregational Vitality Work Group:

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