



SARAH STROUP, LEFT, Sarah Cowan, Ed McGuire and Amy Hastings, seen here in front of St. Stephen's Church in downtown Middlebury, are part of a community outreach effort between St. Stephen's and St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Vergennes that is to result in facility improvements to better meet the needs of area residents.

Independent photo/Trent Campbell

Local churches aim to increase efficiency

Clergy hope to make best use of resources

By JOHN FLOWERS

VERGENNES — Two Addison County places of worship are taking a close look at their respective, historic church buildings in an effort to better tailor their space to meet the growing needs of their respective communities.

At issue is a two-year study involving 10 churches statewide, including St. Stephen's Episcopal Church on the green in Middlebury and St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Vergennes. It's called the Strategic Investment in Sacred Places (SISP), designed to help the churches evaluate their assets — including structures, programs and human resources — and determine how to use their capital more efficiently to help those in need in their communities.

"Our space could be used for meals, recreation, after-school, art classes ... these are the possibilities that we can imagine, but we need to meet up with community partners to learn of things beyond our imagination," said Sarah Stroup, who is a leader of the SISP study at St. Paul's.

Amy Hastings is helping with the SISP study at St. Stephen's. She explained St. Stephen's and St. Paul's were both invited by the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont to participate. The United Church of Christ and the Preservation Trust of Vermont are also involved in the effort, which is being spearheaded by the Philadelphia-based group Partners for Sacred Places — a national non-profit organization that works with

places of worship throughout the United States.

"It is a real honor for the 10 churches in Vermont that have been invited to participate," Hastings said.

Leaders from the two congregations are receiving training on how to evaluate what their churches are currently able to provide in the way of space and philanthropy.

"We have been learning how you calculate the value of what your church community adds to the community at large," Hastings said.

With SISP guidance, St. Stephen's recently calculated at \$200,000 the combined financial value of nine specific services and amenities the church provided last year to the community. Those programs included community meals, community rooms, the Peasant Market and international support. Eighty-one percent of the recipients of that support were non-members of the church, according to information in a recent St. Stephen's newsletter.

St Paul's, among other things, hosted a local food shelf, a community garden, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and the local Girl Scouts.

Church leaders stress that they are not placing numbers on their philanthropy to brag or try to impress anyone. It is merely a way of coming up with a benchmark that the congregations will try to exceed through greater efficiency and outreach efforts.

"We are asking ourselves, 'What do we have to offer together for the community at this time and in the next decade?'" Hastings said.

"The whole idea is to see the ac-

cred place as a full-time partner in the fabric of the community."

The public will be asked for a lot of input, Stroup said. Plans call for St. Paul's to hold a public meeting in mid-May to receive feedback about the church's space and programming. St. Stephen's is planning a similar meeting for early this fall.

The SISP process will culminate in a report by each church that will include, among other things, histories of each church building and recommendations on how to maximize service to the community at large. Those recommendations might include building upgrades to make space more user-friendly, along with suggestions on new functions and groups the churches might accommodate at times when religious services are not being held.

Officials said they will apply for grants to help defray the costs of any big-ticket building projects that might be recommended.

The study is also helping the St. Stephen's congregation brace for what could be a tumultuous couple of years of construction activity in downtown Middlebury. That construction will include replacement of the two rail overpasses that abut the church property.

"We know we are going to be greatly affected by changes in the downtown," Hastings said.

People can follow the churches' progress on the SISP study, and learn how to provide feedback, by visiting the churches' websites at www.saintpaulsvergennes.org and www.ststephensmidd.org.

Reporter John Flowers is at johnf@addisonindependent.com.

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