

## **Discerning by Doing at Christ Church Cathedral**

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Christ Church Cathedral

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While the Episcopal Church in Connecticut discerns what kind of cathedral, if any, would best serve it now and in the foreseeable future, Christ Church Cathedral continues to engage in a parallel process of “discerning by doing.” Its efforts to “live into” what it means to be a cathedral provide useful information for the larger discernment conversation.

In the midst of the ever-shifting social and cultural context in which it operates, Christ Church Cathedral has chosen to hold fast to the purposes that have animated cathedrals throughout much of Anglican history – engaging and unifying the diocese; “seeking the welfare of the city;” engaging the arts; providing safe space; and bridging religious and civic life.

### Engaging and unifying the Diocese

Historically, Christ Church Cathedral has served as “the” gathering place for diocesan events. Now that the Diocesan Convention has become a movable feast, the Cathedral has been exploring other opportunities to gather people who are divided geographically but united in faith. With the advent of The Commons as a meeting ground, the question of what role a cathedral can or should play as convener has been thrown into even sharper relief.

The answer emerging from Christ Church Cathedral is that it continues to have a unique role to play as a *spiritual* and *ceremonial* home for the gathered church. A designated cathedral is the “rite” place for the ordination of deacons, the renewal of clergy vows, the celebration of golden wedding anniversaries, and the like, because it symbolizes our unity as Episcopalians and our common life.

With this in mind, Christ Church Cathedral has begun to explore additional ways in which it can function as a spiritual gathering place. It has begun to ask, for example, whether parishes that share a patron saint would be interested in gathering at the Cathedral for a combined celebration. Whether altar guilds

would be interested in gathering at the Cathedral (as they once did) for a liturgically-centered time of sharing and fellowship. Whether it is time to reprise the acolyte festival. While exploring such new and reclaimed possibilities, Christ Church Cathedral continues to welcome gatherings like the Faith Beyond Bars convention that are not ceremonial or liturgical, but that seek to emphasize, by their choice of location, their grounding in our common faith.

In addition to its role as “a” diocesan convener, Christ Church Cathedral continues its tradition of exploring new mission fields and inviting others into shared service to God. Indeed, Christ Church Hartford’s role as mission catalyst was one of explicit reasons that Bishop Brewster prevailed upon the 1919 Diocesan Convention to designate it a cathedral in the first place.

These days, Church by the Pond stands as a prominent example of broadly shared mission and ministry. Clergy and laity from upwards of 20 Episcopal parishes participate on a regular basis, as do people from many other faith traditions who provide nourishing food and companionship.

Several new mission initiatives are underway at the Cathedral. Among them is the Onesimus Project, which seeks to involve religious communities in helping people who have been imprisoned integrate back into society. The Project invites Christians to go beyond the biblical mandate to simply “visit” the imprisoned, and to take the step of warmly embracing our fellow sinners into our communities as sisters and brothers. To that end, the Cathedral is working with the Department of Corrections to devise a way for churches to incorporate inmates into their congregations well in advance of their release from prison. (To accomplish this, inmates would be routinely released on furlough to participate in regularly-scheduled church activities). In addition, the Cathedral is laying the groundwork for churches to enter into partnership with nearby prison halfway houses.

### Seeking the welfare of the city

In Jeremiah 29:7 we are encouraged “to seek the welfare of the city ... , and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” From the outset, Christ Church Cathedral has understood itself to be called to serve the welfare of the City of Hartford and its surroundings. Historically this has taken many forms. Among the new initiatives I want to highlight is an emerging

partnership with the Charter Oak Cultural Center. Housed in a former synagogue on Main Street south of the Cathedral, Charter Oak is a multicultural center that uses the arts to pursue justice on behalf of, and alongside, Hartford's neediest. At present, the Center's Youth Arts Institute provides after school and summer programs for over 1100 inner city youth ages 6 to 18. The Cathedral seeks to develop a durable, mutually advantageous relationship with the Center that focuses on youth education and arts enrichment.

### Engaging the arts

The emerging partnership with the Charter Oak Cultural Center is an example of employing the arts as a direct means to achieving social justice (e.g. a reduction in the achievement gap). Another example is another potential Cathedral partner, the Judy Dworin Performance Project, whose Bridging Boundaries Arts Intervention Program uses dance, song, story-telling and the spoken word to give voice and opportunity to women who are caught up in the criminal justice system.

There is also much to be said for supporting the arts simply because they have the capacity to elevate the human spirit and connect us with our better selves. To that end, Christ Church Cathedral has renewed its involvement with Hartford's First Night Festival. This past New Year's Eve, the Cathedral's organist gave a series of mini-concerts, followed by a hands-on demonstration of the Cathedral's pipe organ, to the delight of dozens of children of all ages. While this was taking place in the Cathedral, a magician, David Reed-Brown was holding 200 people spellbound in the auditorium. An ordained Baptist minister, Reed-Brown uses magic to imbue his audience with a sense of wonder.

The Cathedral has begun to reconnect with old partners such as the Hartford Stage Company and the Hartt School for the Performing Arts, and is exploring partnerships with less mainstream organizations as well. In addition, the Cathedral has embraced the Asylum Quartet as an "ensemble in residence," and is exploring additional ways to support emerging artists.

### Providing safe space

Churches in general and cathedrals in particular have a long history of providing safe space for people who seek to "transform unjust structures of society." Last

month Christ Church Cathedral hosted the first of a series of “Moral Monday” demonstrations in which concerned individuals take action in pursuit of social justice. The “Moral Monday” movement was launched in North Carolina in 2013, as a grass roots response to voting rights restrictions, cutbacks in social service programs, repeal of the Racial Justice Act, and the whittling away of abortion rights. Connecticut is now the 13<sup>th</sup> state to embrace this movement.

After rallying in the Cathedral’s auditorium, demonstrators marched down Main Street to Hartford’s City Hall and staged a 4 ½ minute “die-in” to symbolize the 4 ½ hours that the body of Michael Brown lay on a Ferguson, Missouri street after he was fatally shot by police officers last summer. The demonstrators then returned to the Cathedral to debrief, to sing, and to pray. The Cathedral will continue to host Moral Mondays, thereby providing safe space for those who take risks for the sake of the Gospel (no matter their self-understanding).

### Bridging religious and civic life

Historically, Cathedrals have served as a bridge between different faith traditions, and between religious and civic life. Although Christ Church Cathedral has not embraced this role in recent years, doing so is of a piece with the other roles outlined above. Indeed, in seeking the welfare of the city and providing safe space for those who pursue social transformation, the Cathedral has found itself in conversation with a wide range of religious and civic actors.

Given its proximity to the state Capitol, the Cathedral is well-situated to advance the public policy interests and concerns of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. This work was ably and energetically pursued by Bishop James Curry prior to his retirement. Now that Jim is no longer our flag bearer, there is much to be said for the “diocesan church” taking on this role.

As respects navigating religious differences, given the ongoing disintegration of the Middle East, there is likely to be an increasing need for Christians, Jews and Muslims to develop a rich and full understanding of one another. If Christ Church Cathedral decides to take this on, it can readily draw on the resources of the Hartford Seminary, which has a deep bench of Islamic scholars, and is a national leader when it comes to interfaith and inter-religious dialogue.