

Finding the Gap/Stewardship Realty Parish Summary

17 May 2026

During the Annual Meeting this past February, my Co-Warden, David Nevin, presented a brief outline of the plan for the coming year. He mentioned that our leadership will be focusing on expanding our mission to the greater community, expanding our mission to serve those in need. As we all know, St. Stephen's Table is the primary mission of our church. Feeding the hungry has been a passion of ours for decades. But can we do more in this community? Should we do more? Do we have the capacity to do more, not just in terms of physical space, but in terms of volunteer support? All good questions that all of you are welcome to help us to discern.

In late February, we started in earnest with a project we're calling "Finding the Gap". An attempt to determine the unmet needs of the most vulnerable in our community and figure out if we could fill any of those gaps. We have excellent civic-minded organizations in this city that strive every day to relieve the stress on downtrodden and vulnerable people. However, they will willingly admit that there is always more that can be done. There are gaps to fill.

Our Vestry organized a discussion with several of these civic-minded organizations to better understand the work they're doing and where they think the gaps are. Participants included Zion Lutheran Church, ServiceNet, the Sheriff's Department, Cathedral of the Beloved, and the Berkshire Immigrant Center to name a few, who joined us for a fruitful 2 - hour roundtable dialogue. They spoke passionately about the needs in the community, how they are addressing those needs, how their projects are funded, and the gaps that remain.

As you probably know, Zion Lutheran Church on First St. developed a Housing Resource Center called *The First* in collaboration with an organization called Hearthway. The project is currently managed by an organization called ServiceNet.

From the ServiceNet website: *“The First in Pittsfield is a welcoming, low-barrier space where individuals experiencing homelessness or housing instability can access restrooms, showers, laundry machines, lockers, a commercial kitchen, and most importantly—connection.”*

This project in particular got our attention for a few reasons. First, it’s an excellent faith-based project that fits with almost any church’s mission. Second, it was recently completed in January so the details of executing the project are still fresh in everybody’s mind. Lastly, it’s a project that went through many phases from concept to completion, so there’s a lot of knowledge about how to carry out a project of this size and an understanding of the roadblocks that slowed them down. We can learn from that.

We gained valuable information from the many organizations that supported this meeting. In addition to finding out in more detail what these organizations do in our community, we found out that there are more gaps than we thought; some of those include:

- *Adequate housing for families*
- *Overnight shelters in cold and inclement weather*
- *Safe, warm spaces between 4:30 – 10:00 p.m.*
- *Place for people to play/explore/engage*
- *After school programs for children*
- *Helping immigrants feel supported and welcomed*
- *Transportation*
- *Food insecurity during lunchtime*

- *Bi/multi-lingual capable individuals at social service agencies*
- *Public restrooms*

The opportunities for us are plentiful. We are approaching this carefully, methodically, and with open minds. And major decisions will be made with feedback and buy-in from the congregation.

I want to clarify that the “Finding the Gap” journey we’re on is not limited only to missions that serve the hungry and the homeless among us. Those are obviously noble causes and we want to do something that aligns with our mission, but as we dove deeper into the discussion during leadership meetings, we identified that there are other needs in the community as well: struggling artists that are looking for inexpensive spaces to rent, children that have nowhere to go after school when their parents are still working, elderly folks that can’t leave their homes to get groceries or meals. These problems should not be ignored; all options are on the table.

I also want to emphasize that this journey does not necessarily end with us filling the empty spaces in the Parish House. We started this effort informally last year when the Berkshire Immigrant Center moved to North St. and left our entire second floor empty. Yes, that’s a bit painful for several reasons, but expanding our mission to the community does not have to include physical space. In fact, we have more options if we expand beyond our physical space. All options are open.

In parallel with the Finding the Gap project, we are working with a national consultant called Stewardship Realty. Stewardship Realty is a mission-driven real estate firm that provides asset management and development services exclusively to faith-based organizations. Their work is geared toward developing financial sustainability. They are involved all over the country with churches like

ours that are in a similar situation: a large facility with little tenant occupancy and ongoing deficit spending.

I'll note that Rev Nina has been in touch with Rev Steven Wilco, Interim Canon to the Ordinary at the Episcopal Diocese of Western MA, about our engagement with Stewardship Realty. From Steven's reply email: *"Thanks for sharing this. I'm so excited that you're taking this step. I think it is potentially a huge investment in the future of St. Stephen's. Bishop Howell has heard many good things about them and we are beginning a process to work with them on two properties initially that the diocese has an immediate responsibility for. We would love to hear from you how this goes and how we can continue to support you in the process."* So the diocese is on board with this.

With Vestry approval, we have recently sent a \$7,000 fee to Stewardship Realty and for that fee, in part, we'll receive:

- Feasibility Analysis - assessment of potential development opportunities for the Property with due consideration for, and integration of, the existing structures.
- Mission Analysis. evaluate the Property's missional and strategic potential.
- Consultation with local agencies. Engage in preliminary discussions with relevant municipal and governmental agencies as Stewardship Realty deems appropriate. (deeds, permits, zoning regulations, easements)
- Final report. Deliver a presentation summarizing findings.

The plan is for the Finding the Gap team to work in a parallel timeline with the Stewardship Realty group. As output from either of these groups comes out, the Vestry will review it and determine what, if any, next steps to take.

Finally, over the last several months we've asked you to fill out a couple of surveys. The purpose of the surveys is to ensure that the goals of the leadership team are aligned with the expectations of the congregation and that we're being transparent as we pursue these goals and navigate through the current challenges. We do analyze your inputs and take your feedback seriously.

Today we'll be presenting you with another survey. Please take a paper copy or complete the survey online through the QR code or link in the bulletin. We're asking that they be returned by June 2. We expect to report on the results of this survey before the end of June. There's an open question at the end of the survey for any questions you have about what's happening in the parish. Please ask any questions about today's report or any other area of concern.

Thank you.

Survey link: <https://tinyurl.com/42zdh2hp>

Or, use this QR code to take you to the online survey:

