

Three Episcopal churches sign joint covenant

By John Moss

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Three Episcopal churches in the city are in the process of merging into a single parish.

The Episcopal Church of the Ascension, 160 Rock St., St. Mark's Episcopal Church, 125 Mason St., and the St. John's-St. Stephen's Episcopal Partnership, 711 Middle St., held a covenant-signing worship service Sunday at the Episcopal Church of the Ascension.

The new Episcopal parish will be named the Church of the Holy Spirit, located at 160 Rock St.

A fourth Episcopal church, St. Luke's, 315 Warren St., has decided against joining the merger at this time.

"Over the past few years, none of those churches was going particularly well," said the Rev. Wallace Gober, who was interim pastor of St. John's-St. Stephen's Episcopal Church.

"They were doing okay, but it was the decision of the people that they could do more of the work of the church if they pooled their resources," Gober said.

He said St. Luke's Episcopal Church has indicated, "They may join us at a later date. They're not ready to make that radical move yet."

Gober said the other three churches believe they can "offer the community a better witness than they could if they stayed separate."

Each of the three merging parishes has a congregation of 50 to 60 members, so the new Church of the Holy Spirit will have about 150 members, he said.

Since the clergy of the three merging churches are close to retirement, Gober said, "in the next few months, we'll bring in a priest for the merged parish."

Gober reminded that the merger would not be finalized until it receives approval at the convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts in November.

The decision to merge came following 14 months of "discernment," during which the vestries of the three parishes met regularly and eventually decided upon a "covenant of agreement," said Maria Plati, communications director for the state Episcopal diocese.

The Rt. Rev. Roy F. "Bud" Cederholm Jr., bishop suffragan of the diocese, was celebrant at the service.

During the service, representatives of the three merging churches signed the covenant and celebrated their newly constituted faith community.

In the agreement, representatives of the three congregations vowed to “work diligently together to establish a unified” Episcopal church.

To that end, the congregations will seek the consent of the diocesan bishop, the Standing Committee, the Diocesan Council and the state convention to the unifying of the parishes no later than Nov. 30, the first Sunday in Advent.

Each parish pledged that when such consent has been granted and the legal entity established and formally acknowledged by the diocese, it will transfer its property and financial resources to the newly-created parish and thereafter operate as one united congregation.

It was stated further in the covenant that during the transition to “becoming one body in Christ in the City of Fall River,” the congregations “covenant to worship, conduct joint mission and ministries, and engage in activities of mutual support to one another” at the church site, 160 Rock St.

The mission of the new Church of the Holy Spirit is to be a “diverse community, dedicated to spreading the good news of Jesus Christ through praise, worship and outreach.”

All are welcomed to grow in their faith.

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