

Good morning. Thank you for your donations of non-perishable food, clothing and toiletries for the homeless in our community who are housed by Shelters of Saratoga, or SOS. The boxes in the back of the church are overflowing with donations. Your generosity today will help fulfill some of their basic needs.

At the Diocese's Annual Convention in June, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry gave a wonderful sermon during the principal mass. After a few introductory comments, Bishop Curry started his sermon citing Jesus handing down a new, and the greatest, commandment: That we are to love God with all our hearts and we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Bishop Curry continued, saying: "The truth is, the older I get, the longer I live ... the more I realize, it's all about love...."

I agree with Jesus and Bishop Curry. Indeed, we must love God and love our neighbors.

Our donations today to help the homeless housed by SOS embodies that paramount commandment of loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Unfortunately, there are numerous individuals in our community who are suffering and lacking necessary housing, shelter and counseling services. Bethesda has an opportunity to follow Jesus' commandment of loving thy neighbor by helping the homeless in our community through our new parish house and community center.

The first floor of the new parish house building has ample space for Bethesda's congregation's use for worship, religious education, prayer meetings, choir practices, office and library needs, and hosting social gatherings. That leaves the upper three floors available for us to serve our community, as previously discussed.

In late July, Bethesda received non-binding letters of intent from five community-service organizations which want to partner with Bethesda to accommodate more than 40 guests in one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments in the second, third and fourth floors of Bethesda's new building.

The five organizations partnering with Bethesda are:

1. Backstretch Employee Service Team, or BEST, which helps race-track workers who are either injured and recuperating, or have substance use disorders and are participating in recovery programs;
2. Wellspring, which helps victims of domestic violence including homeless families;
3. Veterans and Community Housing Coalition, which helps homeless military veterans;
4. Transitional Services Association, or TSA, which helps homeless individuals with mental illness or substance use disorders; and
5. In Our Name, which is part of Skidmore College's Restorative Justice project, plans to offer an occasional café operation where people can pay according to their financial means.

Common spaces would be made available for counseling, recovery meetings, or special events. If necessary, room remains for Bethesda to host the Code Blue emergency cold-weather shelter.

Bethesda's partner agencies see the healing value in Bethesda's plan for people of different backgrounds to socialize and support one another. Additionally, these agencies' representatives have commented that the downtown location of Bethesda's new parish house is ideal. Too frequently the homeless are pushed to the furthest outreaches in Saratoga County, isolating them away from vital services, stores, and other people.

Bethesda's location is in the City's T-6 zone. The City Zoning Code allows for "religious institutions" to operate with Site Plan Approval, which Bethesda already received. This week Bethesda is submitting a nine-page document to the City Zoning Officer affirming its position that providing housing resources is part of its religious mission, protected the New York State and United States Constitutions. That document will be available to you on Bethesda's website and in the back of the church.

Bethesda is forming a new 501-c-3 corporation, Mercy House of Saratoga, to facilitate Bethesda's mission by managing the housing space in our new building. The Board of Directors would be nominated by Bethesda's Vestry. Mercy House will have its own fiscal existence, including an endowment, separate from Bethesda, but the two entities would be closely linked. It is anticipated that Mercy House will be able to receive grants from foundations, New York State and other sources that do not make contributions to religious organizations.

Bethesda has both property assets and financial resources available for this significant project, but additional capital is needed. In the past, fundraising outside of our congregation was difficult, if not impossible, because the proposed community-service uses for Bethesda's new building were too vague.

Now, with five letters of intent in hand, and a separate not-for-profit being formed, we are poised to receive the financial support to make Bethesda's new parish house and community center a reality. Much work remains, however, and I will provide you with another update as we progress.

In the meantime, please continue to pray for Bethesda and this important project. Pray that we, as a congregation, will love God with all our hearts, and that we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Finally, pray that we realize God's will with our new parish house and community center.

Thank you for your attention this morning and support of Bethesda's mission.