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### **God at Work in This Space: A Church Closes and the Mission Transforms** (Hallowell)

For more than 160 years, people have worshipped at 20 Union Street in Hallowell. What began as Saint Matthew's Church in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century became the Episcopal Church of Saints Matthew and Barnabas in 2017, enfolding the parishioners of the former St. Barnabas Church in Augusta.

Over the last few decades, however, the Episcopal Church of Saints Matthew and Barnabas has found its membership aging and its funds dwindling. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional financial challenges.

The Episcopal Church of Saints Matthew and Barnabas has made the decision to permanently close the church in 2021. "We did not come to this decision lightly," says Senior Warden Patricia Buck-Welton, "The church no longer has the finances and resources to remain open."

"I know this news deeply impacts the hearts of our congregants and the community, and mine as well," says Buck-Welton, "But although we are closing a church, we are still called to dedicate our lives to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, comfort the comfortless: in short, to be the hands of Jesus Christ in the world."

The impending closure of the church prompted discussions between the Episcopal Church of Saints Matthew and Barnabas, the Episcopal Diocese of Maine, and the Capital Area New Mainers project - a cross-cultural organization that welcomes immigrants and works to create a thriving, integrated community in central Maine – who was already renting the empty church parsonage next door to house to a refugee family in need of housing.

While the church will close, God's mission in the building continues. The Capital Area New Mainers Project will lease the church building to create new affordable housing space for a refugee family, utilize already existing office space, and celebrate the beautiful sanctuary by using it as event space for dinners, speakers, holiday celebrations and other events to educate the broader community about immigration.

"The space at 20 Union Street is an extraordinary opportunity for the Capital Area New Mainers Project to expand our Better Housing Program and provide needed organizational and event

space! This space will help a great deal to further our mission of helping immigrants thrive while also building long-lasting, mutually sustaining relationships between immigrants and the native-born community here in central Maine,” says Chris Myers Asch, Executive Director of the Capital Area New Mainers Project.

Closing a church is difficult. “It is a grieving process for all involved when a church closes,” says Terrance Reimer, the Canon for Finance and Stewardship for the Episcopal Diocese of Maine, “But there is also hope. It’s heartening to see God’s mission continuing in this place.”

Bishop Thomas Brown shares, “I am deeply inspired by the members and leaders of the Episcopal Church of Saints Matthew and Barnabas who have faithfully discerned this path for their church, and this evolution for their church building. Closing a church is a hard journey that they have walked together. God is most certainly at work in Hallowell, in the faithfulness of the Episcopal Church of Saints Matthew and Barnabas and in the new Mainers who are supported by the Capital Area New Mainers Project.” The Bishop continues, “This is both an ending and a beginning, and so we celebrate even as we grieve. We are they who follow Jesus Christ from a tomb to pathways of resurrection.”

Bishop Brown will be with the members of the Episcopal Church of Saints Matthew and Barnabas in Hallowell to celebrate the final service for the church on Sunday, June 6.

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