



GRACE & ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Robert Bergner, Rector

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PRESS RELEASE: MURAL BEING PAINTED at Grace and St John's Church, Hamden, CT

August 11, 2025

Since the middle of July, artist Chris Gann has been commuting to Hamden from his home in Enfield to paint a mural on a previously blank brick wall at Grace and St John's Church on Dixwell Avenue across from the Hamden Police headquarters. The mural is now almost finished, and has inspired comments from visitors such as "It's something beautiful ... something that was needed."

Gann is one of the many artists who work with RiseUP for Arts, a statewide nonprofit responsible for many of the murals that have been added to the Connecticut landscape in the last dozen years. RiseUP connects artists to the community and manages the process of developing and creating murals and other public art.

Grace and St John's received funding for this project through a Vital Worship, Vital Preaching Grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Grand Rapids, Michigan, with funds provided by Lilly Endowment Inc. The mural is being developed "to make a public connection between worship and mission."

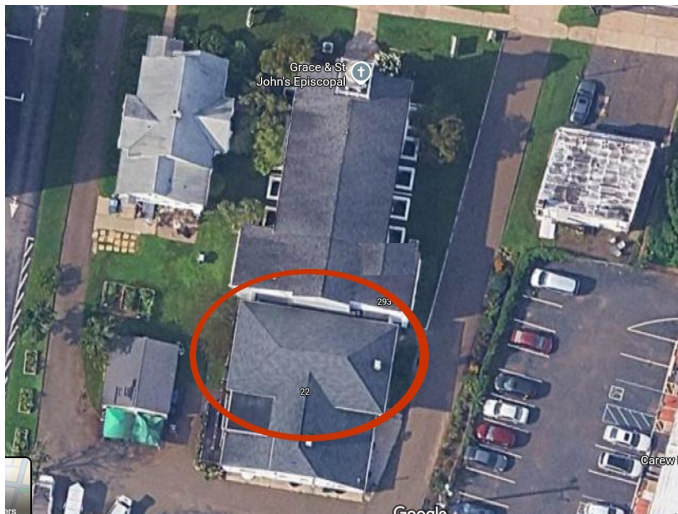
FAST FACTS

- **Grace and St John's is an Episcopal church in Hamden, CT**, representing a merger of three Episcopal congregations. Grace Church was founded in 1790, and its white clapboard building at the corner of Whitney and Dixwell Avenues was constructed in 1820, and moved across the street in 1966 to make room for the Hamden Police headquarters. In 1990, Grace Church merged with St Peter's on the Hill (founded 1958) to become Grace and St Peter's. In 2022, the church of St John the Evangelist in Yalesville closed after 154 years and merged with Grace and St Peter's to become Grace and St John's.
- **The church is well known for its major outreach ministry, Dinner for a Dollar**, which serves a wholesome home-cooked meal to all comers every Friday evening at the church and provides takeout meals on Sundays from its food truck at a location on State Street near the Department of Motor Vehicles. Dinner for a Dollar has been replicated at Hamden Plains United Methodist Church on Saturday evenings, and meals are also offered on two Thursdays per month in cooperation with Christian Tabernacle Baptist Church on Newhall Street.
- **Dinner for a Dollar cooperates with many local organizations** such as Haven's Harvest, the Keefe Center, other faith communities, and restaurant and institutional food services, to share food resources across the community.
- **The church also maintains a vegetable garden** on church property, plus two additional vegetable plots at the community garden in Town Center Park, about 1/3 mile from the church. Produce from these gardens finds its way into dishes prepared for Dinner for a Dollar, or is made available to guests to take home for their own use.
- **Grace and St John's is also the home base of Swords to Plowshares Northeast**, which partners with police departments all over New England to hold gun buybacks, and works with community groups to repurpose parts from the surrendered weapons by forging them into garden tools.
- **The Rev. Robert Bergner** is rector of Grace and St John's. He serves part-time and is also a musician, dancer and teacher. Linda Rolstone is the part-time parish administrator. All the church's outreach ministries are carried out entirely by volunteers, who come from both the church congregation and the community.

OUR STORY

In the 1890s, when the church building was still located across the street, the Grace Church congregation built a “parish house” on the south side of Dixwell Avenue, next to the church rectory (parsonage), to accommodate Sunday school classes, meetings, and other church functions. When the church building was relocated, it was placed some distance in front of the parish house, and an addition was constructed, bridging the gap between the two buildings. (Later, in a further expansion, offices were added to the rear of the parish house.)

RIGHT: Grace Church parish house and rectory, c. 1896. The rectory (2925 Dixwell Avenue) looks much the same today.



LEFT: The old parish house is circled in this satellite photo from 2024. The wider segment between it and the relocated church building constituted an expansion of the worship space.



RIGHT: A hallway, with a much lower roofline, links the expanded worship space to the former parish house.

The exterior of the segment connecting the two buildings is strictly utilitarian in design. Its side walls (facing east and west) have no windows. The east-facing wall borders the entry driveway of the church, where guests for Dinner for a Dollar park and wait in line. The wall looms above the driveway, and, painted stark white, has appeared rather grim and unwelcoming. As murals and other street art began to appear all over Connecticut starting around 2015, several church members began to ponder the idea of transforming this wall by commissioning a mural that would inspire both members and visitors with a vision of our faith and mission.

Due to the covid pandemic, the church’s 200th anniversary at its Centerville location went by with no special celebration, and so did the merger with St John’s. In October 2023, as circumstances returned to something resembling “normal,” Grace and St John’s applied to the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, for a Vital Worship, Vital Preaching grant, to cover a cluster of projects lifting up the faith and outreach of the congregation over the last 200-plus years, including the installation of a mural. The grant application was funded, and the Calvin Institute graciously extended the grant period into 2025 when a number of complications in 2024 delayed the mural design process.

Working with RiseUP and members of the church, a design by Chris Gann was approved in the spring of 2025 and work began in mid-July. The design transforms the faceless brick wall into a sign of loving welcome, and will serve, in the words of our rector, the Rev. Bob Bergner, as “a permanent outward sign of the interface” between our life of faith and prayer and the love of neighbor that grows from it.



LEFT: July 14, 2025. Chris Gann power washing the mural wall after scraping off all the peeling paint. The hedge at the base of the wall has been removed.



RIGHT: July 16, 2025. Chris projects his design onto the wall and marks the layout as a guide for actual painting.



The mural begins to take shape.



ABOVE LEFT: July 18, RIGHT: July 23; BELOW LEFT AND CENTER: July 23; BELOW RIGHT: July 24





Above: August 11: on the verge of completion!

These photos can be sent separately and at a higher resolution, if requested.

MORE INFORMATION

Grace and St John's: <https://www.graceandstjohns.org/>

The website does not yet include anything about the mural, but see our [Facebook page](#)

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RiseUP for Arts: <https://www.theriseupgroup.org/> Matt Conway
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Artist, Chris Gann: https://www.instagram.com/chrisgann_painter/?hl=en
cgann@risd.edu

Church rector: The Rev. Robert Bergner (on sabbatical through the end of August)

Church Senior Warden (elected lay leader) Renee Janes
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Dinner for a Dollar founder and leader: Allison Batson
allison.dinner4dollar@gmail.com

Local media recognition of Dinner for a Dollar: [NBCCT, February 24, 2020](#)
[New Haven Independent, July 5, 2019](#)

Calvin Institute of Christian Worship: <https://worship.calvin.edu/grants/info/worshipping-communities>
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