

## **The Bishop's Report to Convention 2023 ("The Other Address")**

Dear Beloved in Christ,

At this year's convention I felt the need to speak to you as your spiritual leader and shepherd, addressing the subject of discernment and the holy work that lies before us as we consider a potential reunification with the Diocese of Bethlehem. I want us to fully engage the Holy Spirit as we pray and imagine our future together as the Body of Christ and so I took advantage of my bishop's address to offer some thoughts on the process of discernment.

In my role as the "overseer" of the diocese, I want in *this* report to share some of what I am seeing from both a "bird's eye" and "down on the ground" view. There are many wonderful programs that have started in the past year or so, fueled in part by Shaped by Faith; there are well established ministries that continue to do their work, there are bodies that serve the process and administrative needs of the diocese like the Council of Trustees, the Standing Committee, Finance Committee and the Commission on Ministry and there are areas of need that are not yet being fully engaged in our geographic area- places of potential development and growth. There is also the sore news of decline that, while typical of most mainline churches these days, cannot be ignored.

### **Decline, Membership and Closing Churches**

According to the most recent parochial report data for The Episcopal Church, membership in our diocese currently stands at 8,403. In 2013, a decade ago, we claimed 12,646 members, a loss of 33.6%. Our Average Sunday Attendance in total across the diocese in 2013 was 4,536 on a Sunday and these days it is 2,436, showing a loss of 46.3% This decline is in keeping with other dioceses in The Episcopal Church but simply being in "good company" is not enough. We need to accept that our church is growing smaller and respond in ways that help us to plan for the future. The original hope of our Shaped by Faith program was to address the ongoing decline of the church and to "re-shape" ourselves in bold ways for mission, but we have not yet realized any major shape-shifting changes. Parishes- even those with fewer than a dozen in the pews on Sunday- have been reluctant to consider merging or closing their worship location to join with another congregation; there is a strong identification in our diocese with our buildings, our individual communities, and our "theology of place." This is, actually, a scriptural principle: think of the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures of our forebears in faith who, after arriving in a new space claimed it by setting up an altar and consecrating it as Holy Space: After wrestling with an stranger in the night, Jacob woke at daybreak and said, "Surely God is in this place..." and he set up a stone, poured oil on it and said, "(this shall be) God's house." (Genesis 28) Later on, as Joshua and his people crossed into the Promised Land, he directed them to set up 12 stones, one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel and to memorialize their safe crossing by marking it with stones (Joshua 4). We love our buildings and our sacred spaces.

As your bishop, I recognize the gift of ministry in small churches. We often talk about the benefit of eating, shopping, and living "local" and church is no exception. The service that we

can offer to our communities in feeding programs, after school programs, diaper banks and other hands-on ministries are powerful when they are enacted in the villages where we live and out of the churches that are planted there.

This year (2023) the Council of Trustees (according to Diocesan Canon VII Sec 6) voted to conclude ministry at the Resurrection Mission after its 5-year experiment due to low attendance and overwhelming capital needs, the parish at St. Luke's in Altoona has elected to sell their building with the permission of the Bishop and Standing Committee, and the parish of St Andrew's ("In the City") in Harrisburg has voted to close as of December 31, 2023 and awaits confirmation of their decision at our convention.

### **Numbers leading to Emerging Ideas**

In our diocese we have 63 parishes. Currently have 10 parishes in transition (churches who are looking for a priest). Of the 10 parishes in transition, 3 of them are seeking full time clergy and 7 of them are seeking part time clergy. 70% of our parishes employ part time clergy.

7 parishes in the West Branch and Northern Tier Convocations share 2 regional missionaries, 4 parishes have "Sunday only" supply priests, and 3 parishes that have no priest (they read Morning Prayer and enjoy a supply priest when they can find one.)

There is a total of 24 parishes, or 38% of churches in our diocese, who are living outside of the traditional "one parish, one priest model."

Regarding Average Sunday Attendance, or "ASA," 31 (or 49%- nearly half) of our congregations have an ASA of fewer than 25 people on a Sunday and, when you go up one more tier and add the number of churches worshipping with 50 or fewer people on a Sunday, it is 49 (or 77%).

There is a need to support parishes who have people who want to gather for worship on Sundays, can support themselves with minimal overhead costs, who are ministering in their communities, and who are committed to maintaining a relationship in our diocese by paying their diocesan assessment and offering representation at Convention. Many of these congregations are struggling to meet the demands of parish administration and have little to nourish them locally in congregational development, formation, stewardship, pastoral care, or evangelism training. I have begun conversations with our finance department and some other key individuals in trying to assess how diocesan leadership can assist these congregations with some of their ongoing administrative and programmatic needs. This emerging idea of increased service to our smaller parishes is in keeping with Paul's image in 1 Corinthians 12 in which he writes about the dynamics of the Body as a whole: *"The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"* <sup>22</sup> *On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable... But God has put the body together,*<sup>25</sup> *so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal*

*concern for each other. <sup>26</sup> If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."*

I am looking forward to continuing the development of this support for our small parishes.

### **Joining Together in Mission**

Shaped by Faith has offered 12 grants in this past year totaling \$358,746 to support new collaborative ministries in the diocese and to support (in part) the ministry of two regional missionaries, one in the West Branch Convocation and one in the Northern Tier. The funding of projects that get us working together- parishes with other parishes, congregations with area non-profits, churches with civic organizations and ecumenical and interfaith efforts that connect us at a faith-based level are wonderful. We can do more when we are together, and this lesson is being realized in all parts of our diocese. Shaped by Faith projects are not ends in themselves, but gateways to building longer and deeper relationships of ministry, formation, fellowship, support, and programs that serve our neighbors. It is my hope in the remaining four years of funding that Shaped by Faith will help to give birth to many more creative programs and find ways for us to work together for the wholeness of our communities.

### **Diocesan based Ministries**

The mission that we serve- God's mission- calls us to serve as reconcilers in the world. This ministry is carried out most aptly at the local level with feeding ministries, clothing banks, music ministries, food banks, pastoral care, blessing boxes, ministry to children after school, senior care, care for returning citizens, and many, many ways that mark the intersection of the needs of the neighborhood and the gifts of the parish.

There are other ministries that are effective on a diocesan level when joining together in collaboration is the most effective way to accomplish goals. Saving Lives: Ending Gun Violence, Migration Ministries, Dismantling Racism and Creation Care are four of these ministries that are making a difference in our diocese and working for God's justice. There is always room for more people to join in these ministries and room for the Spirit to lift up a new area of care and concern, as well.

### **Maintaining our Internal Structure and Processes**

The members of our process and administrative boards and their ministries are critical to maintaining the health of our diocese as it is currently structured. The Standing Committee, Commission on Ministry, Finance Committee and Council of Trustees engage 66 people, all told, in ministry in the diocese. We have learned how to use Zoom for most of our meetings and this has allowed us to draw people from all the regions of the diocese, reducing the need to travel long distances for meetings. The Commission on Ministry has reworked its process in the past year to include a new portfolio-based approach to formation called the "Individual Formation Process or IFP" and the Council of Trustees continues to oversee the programmatic life of the diocese approving a budget that disperses our assets for ministry as there are needs, gifts and passion. The Standing Committee works monthly to support my ministry as a Council of Advice

and also plays its important role in distributed leadership, approving ordinations and parish ventures in encumbrances and property sales.

### **The Stevenson School**

The Dean T. Stevenson School for Ministry has had a great year expanding its student base. The school has had participation in the last year from 20 different dioceses in The Episcopal Church seeking solid, thorough, and quality formation programs for lay people, deacons, and priests. There have been 250 enrollments in the online school in the past year and the Advisory Board is growing to include representation from other dioceses to expand our reach and build strength. Dean Sarah Stonesifer Boylan has worked to develop our faculty by adding some new voices and curricular offerings that are drawing new students to our school.

### **Growing Congregations**

Despite the systemic decline of The Episcopal Church and the identification with small churches in our Episcopal tradition, our diocese also includes several parishes that are large and drawing new people to its pews each week. The combination of an appealing critical mass, excellent programming, rich liturgy, outstanding music, programs for children and youth, clear processes of member incorporation, opportunities for adult formation, and strong leadership contributes to the growth of these parishes. Some of them have found new ways to join God in the neighborhood and are erasing the boundaries between church and the wider community. Others have listened deeply to the spiritual needs of the people in their context and are offering programs and liturgies that invite people from outside of our tradition into our sacred spaces. The engagement of new people into our congregations whose spiritual hunger is being met in our diocese is exciting and affirming.

### **New Horizons and Areas of Development**

*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Ephesians 2:10

One of the calls that we are given is to continually seek new horizons and look for new places where we might shine the light of God. In the diocese we have opportunities that are not yet realized and new ministries to engage our hearts and minds:

#### **LGBTQ+ ministry**

I have recently joined the board of a new non-profit in our Commonwealth called Fairness Pennsylvania. ([www.fairnesspenn.org](http://www.fairnesspenn.org)). This statewide civil rights advocacy organization is dedicated to fair treatment and civil rights for LGBTQ+ Pennsylvanians. Through community education and legislative advocacy, this organization ensures LGBTQ+ people can be open, honest, and safe at home, at work, and in the community. Our work in this brand-new nonprofit is just beginning.

#### **Latinx ministry**

According to the most recent census, the Latino/Hispanic community in Pennsylvania has grown 45.8% since 2010. Lancaster has a Latinx population of 40%, York 32%, and Harrisburg 25%. Our

siblings in Christ in the Diocese of Bethlehem have begun a Latinx congregation at their cathedral which has doubled in size in the past year. We might do well to explore how our diocese could serve this same population in our region and learn from those who have been successful in their efforts.

### **Property Discernment**

With a Diocesan Property Manager on staff, we are in a very good position to discern the future of our unused properties in Renovo, Mt. Carmel, Brookland/Ulysses and to offer oversight of the properties in Shippensburg (formerly The Episcopal Home) that is now being used as transitional housing and the rectory in Shippensburg which is now being used as the site for Grace Place ministry, Circle of Love clothing bank and a Counselling Center affiliated with Shippensburg University. Soon, St. Andrew's, Harrisburg will also be vacant. Discernment around our diocesan offices at 101 Pine Street in Harrisburg continues with minimal capital improvements being made as we await the outcome of our potential reunification with the Diocese of Bethlehem.

### **Diocesan staff configuration**

We have a "mostly appropriately" sized staff for the size of our diocese but some of our most pressing and critical needs like Children, Youth and Family ministry, Safe Church and Property Management are currently only assigned to people holding part time positions. Further, the diocese is without a Canon to the Ordinary right now. Canons to the Ordinary traditionally serve as important resources for parishes and clergy in congregational development, oversight of transition ministry and mutual ministry reviews, conflict management and clergy pastoral care. Right now, we have an interim transition minister who also oversees the administration of Shaped by Faith grants.

The areas of Finance, and Communications & Events are well staffed in the diocese and our Stevenson School is also appropriately staffed with a dean and part time associate dean. We have a part time bookkeeper; archivist, registrar, and HR associate; and an independent contractor that manages our social media under the direction of our Canon for Communications. The Executive Assistant to the bishop is a .75 position.

The diocesan staff works extremely hard and is loyal and devoted to serving our parishes to the best of their ability. In the upcoming year I hope to appoint a Regional Canon to the Ordinary in the North and a Regional Canon to the Ordinary in the South. These regional appointments will mimic the dispersed staffing model that the Diocese of Bethlehem uses and allow for local, responsive assistance to our parishes.

### **Conclusion**

In the eighth year, now, of my episcopacy, I feel that I have a good sense of the gifts and needs of our diocese. The offering of Shaped by Faith has opened an avenue for congregations to try on new ways of serving together in mission, and opportunities for support as they envision more strategic realignment.

The work of discerning possible reunification with the Diocese of Bethlehem is critical as we plan for our future as The Episcopal Church in this region of Pennsylvania.

My personal discernment for the future is to see us through this process of exploration with the Diocese of Bethlehem faithfully, prayerfully, and with listening hearts open to God's will for us. This diocese is filled with strong, dear, and loving people who care about their churches and love Jesus. It is a blessing and an honor to serve as your bishop.

In the Way of Love,  
+Audrey

20 October 2023