BISHOP’S ADDRESS

233rd Annual Convention
The Episcopal Church in Connecticut

18 November, 2017

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Bishop Diocesan

(The address will be offered as a “TED Talk” on Saturday morning, November 18, 2017 at the 233rd Annual Convention of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut meeting at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Greenwich, CT. The “TED Talk” address will be found as YouTube video linked on the ECCT Annual Convention website www.episcopalct.org.)

“The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”
(Acts 16:14)

In my address to our 232nd Annual Convention of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut last year in Hartford, I asserted that we are witnessing the demise of Christendom (the close association of the life of the Church with the political, economic and social powers of world.) I noted that while the end of Christendom might occasion sadness and anxiety for those of us brought up in the 20th century church, Episcopalians in Connecticut are embracing bold and courageous changes as we seek to participate in God’s mission in new times. Chief among these changes has been our TREC-CT vision (Task Force on Reimagining the Episcopal Church in Connecticut) with
its Ministry Networks, Mission Council, and new Regions served by Region Missionaries.

I closed my address last year by inviting us all to take a so called “Sabbatical Year,” resting into the nascent work of TREC-CT and waiting on God to show us where we need to go next. And I believe God has indeed blessed this past year by giving us in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut new understandings and new practices for participating in God’s mission in these radically changing times.

What do I mean by new understandings and new practices for participating in God’s mission? To begin with, I believe we need to move beyond a focus on the end of Christendom. It is true that the old political, economic, and social structures that gave power, place and privilege to the Church are ebbing away, especially here in New England – the part of our country that the Pew and Gallup research organizations describe as the least religious. Even given the irreligiousness of New England, I do not think it is helpful anymore to describe our circumstances as “post-Christendom.” Doing so makes Christendom the reference point of our life in Christ and looks back to a time that is irreparably lost. And I am not convinced that Christendom really served the mission of God in Jesus that well anyway.

So, instead of describing our time as “post-Christendom,” I wonder if we might look at the context for of our lives in Christ today as more of a “New Missional Age.”
What do I mean by a New Missional Age? I mean that today, right now, right here, God is alive in Jesus; and each and every one of us through our baptism is called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be about God’s mission in the world. I believe that God has had, and will always have the Church, the Body of Christ, that God needs to be about God’s purposes, God’s mission, in the world. This New Missional Age can be considered a new reformation, a new apostolic era, (much like the Church we read about in the Bible) in which God is effecting God’s restoring, reconciling mission in new ways. God is inviting us to be the “Jesus Movement” (as our Presiding Bishop wonderfully reminds us) even as the structures and institutions of the church as we have known it crash down around us. This New Missional Age thus calls us to reconceive who we are as local expressions of the Body of Christ, parishes and worshipping communities, through new (or perhaps reclaimed ancient) spiritual practices.

Over the last year, your elected and appointed leaders in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut have been playing with new understandings of what it means to be a parish/worshipping community in this New Missional Age. The Leadership Gathering (a four times a year day-long meeting of the Mission Council, Standing Committee, Commission on Ministry, and Trustees for Donations and Bequests), your bishops and canons, and postulants and candidates preparing for ordained ministry in the 21st
century, have tried on a four-point description of what a parish/worshipping community might look like in this New Missional Age. The points are:

• **A Community of Theological Imagination** – Parishes and worshipping communities are primarily to be places where people come together to talk about God and share stories about what God is doing in their lives individually and corporately.

• **Fed by Word and Sacrament** – We share stories about what God is up to in our own lives within the larger story of God’s saving action in the world as found in Holy Scripture; we dwell in God’s Word. And the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Eucharist and the other sacraments of God’s grace sustain this Word centered community.

• **Forming Disciples and Apostles** – The purpose of our coming together in parishes and worshipping communities is to: 1) help us be more faithful followers of Jesus (disciples) and 2) assist us in our participation in God’s mission in the world as apostles.

• **Connected to the Wider Body of Christ** - As Anglicans/Episcopalians we are catholic Christians (small “c” catholic as in “universal.”) Our parishes and worshipping communities are not islands unto ourselves. We are called to be the Body of Christ together, serving God’s mission collaboratively through such vehicles as
our: Regions with our Region Missionaries, Ministry Networks, this Annual Convention, and our participation in diocesan Common Mission Support.

In this New Missional Age, I believe that every parish and worshipping community in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut is called to examine and reorient its life and resources as: communities of theological imagination, fed by Word and sacrament, forming disciples and apostles, connected to the wider Body of Christ.

You might ask next: how do we go about becoming these kind of parishes and worshipping communities, the kind of Church God wants us and needs us to be, in this New Missional Age? I do not believe we can think and plan our way forward into the future Church, for we do not entirely know what God has in store for us. Rather, becoming the Body of Christ God in this New Missional Age requires us to embrace new spiritual practices – practices that are as ancient as they are new.

Through our partnership with the Missional Network, the Episcopal Church in Connecticut has joined with five other dioceses across The Episcopal Church in a project called “Living Local, Joining God.” Six of our parishes have specifically committed themselves to trying on new spiritual practices as they seek to become more missional. But it is not only this collection of parishes involved in the “Living Local, Joining God” project that are practicing new ways of being the church. Most of
our diocesan-wide get-togethers including but not limited to: the quarterly Leadership Gathering of our Mission Council, Standing Committee, Commission on Ministry and Donations and Bequests; our Region Convocations; Faithful Futures (monthly meetings of various parishes that come together to share ideas and possibilities in an open space format;) Recently Ordained Clergy meetings; Safe Church Trainings; and even this Annual Convention all are experimenting with one or more spiritual practices for this New Missional Age. So what are these spiritual practices? There are five:

1. **Listening** - We are called first and foremost to listen to God. We do this by Dwelling in the Word (as we just did this morning) and by listening to what God is up to in our neighborhoods. God invites us to engage with Holy Scripture and also move out into our local contexts to discover God’s restoring and reconciling action in the world.

2. **Discerning** – Listening to God in Scripture and in our neighborhoods, we then discern together what God might be calling us to do next, in new ways.

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Together we ask ourselves: how might we join with God in what God is up to around us? Where is the Holy Spirit calling us now?

3. **Trying on** – Our discernment leads us to consider what new ways we might we to participate in God’s mission? How might we try on being the Body of Christ in our faith communities and in our neighborhoods in new ways? These try on experiments are not to be arduous or overwhelming but rather doable and life-giving activities in which failure is valued as a learning opportunity.

4. **Reflecting** – After we try on these new ways of participating in God’s mission, we then come together to consider what God is revealing to us. Here we share our stories, in one on one encounters and corporately, as the Body of Christ. We offer to God and one another our appreciations, regrets, learnings and re-leanings about what God is up to in our lives. And we wait on God’s leading, trusting that God will reveal how God wants us to be in this New Missional Era.

5. **Deciding** - And finally we decide. We decide how God is calling us forward in God’s mission and we take concrete steps to get there. This decision point is not, however, a terminus or end of the road but rather a new beginning. For once we have decided where we want to go and how to move forward, we then need to return to our posture of listening.
And so this circle of spiritual practice starts all over: listening, discerning, trying on, reflecting, and deciding; listening, discerning, trying on, reflecting, and deciding; listening, discerning, trying on, reflecting, and deciding; and on and on. As we Episcopalians in Connecticut live these spiritual practices, I believe that God will bless us with light and love, and create in us the Church that God wants us to be to serve God’s mission in this New Missional Age.

Before I conclude, I want to mention briefly three places/horizons that I believe God is calling us to engage as we seek to live into these new understandings and spiritual practices in our neighborhood of Connecticut. They are:

1. **The Sustainability of Creation** – I, along with Christian companions from across Connecticut and New England and with the support of ECCT parishes all along the Connecticut River, was blessed to paddle the length of the Connecticut River from southern Vermont to Long Island Sound this past summer. This Connecticut River Pilgrimage reminded me of both the goodness and beauty of God’s creation, and the vulnerability and plight of the natural world in the face of climate change. How are we called as Christians “to cherish the wondrous gifts of God, and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation”, as our Resolution #6 reminds us?

2. **The Opioid Crisis** – Americans are dying at unprecedented rates because of addiction to heroin and other opioid compounds. In Connecticut, the rate of opioid related deaths continues to skyrocket from 357 deaths in 2012, to 729 in 2015, to 917 last year. At the current rate there will be close to 1100 opioid related deaths this year. What is God calling us to do as Christians in the face of
this death-dealing reality? How are we called to be agents of God’s freedom, light and love for those who are addicted and their loved ones?

3. Economic Challenges of Connecticut – We all know that our state is experiencing serious and challenging economic times. Our legislators were unable to arrive at a budget for our state until late last month, long overdue. Major corporations like General Electric, Aetna, and Alexion are fleeing Connecticut for more attractive economic locales. And our state continues to have one of the highest economic and educational achievement gaps in the nation. How are we as Christians called to work with our elected officials so that we can come together to address the economic woes of our state and ensure an abundant life for all? What is God calling us to do as Christian to ensure the sustainability of creation, and address the opioid and economic crises of our state? These are urgent questions for all of us.

In closing, I want to reiterate what I alluded to at the beginning of this address. Over the last year, we have come to see how the vision of TREC-CT in our Ministry Networks, Mission Council, and Regions served by Region Missionaries have helped us develop new understandings and spiritual practices for this New Missional Age. I am particularly overjoyed to see how our Regions are coming together to serve God’s mission in our neighborhoods and build up the body of Christ across Connecticut. I believe the need to assess the resources and needs of our Regions as we look to the future, as called for in Resolution #9 before us at this Convention, will help us go from strength to strength in this New Missional Era.
Like Lydia, whose heart was opened to hear the Good news of God in Christ as proclaimed by Paul, may our hearts also be opened to what God in Jesus Christ is up to in our midst. And may the Holy Spirit empower us to be the Body of Christ that God wants us to be participating in God’s mission in this New Missional Age.